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BRENDLE
THE HOUSE OF ISLAM

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Methuen's Colonial Library.

INTERPLAY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

SHIPS THAT PASS IN THE NIGHT

IN VARYING MOODS

HILDA STRAFFORD

THE FOWLER

KATHARINE FRENHAM

THE SCHOLAR'S DAUGHTER

INTERPLAY

BY

BEATRICE HARRADEN

AUTHOR OF

"SHIPS THAT PASS IN THE NIGHT"

"AND THERE WAS MOCHE PLAYE AND ENTERPLAVE
OF MUSICK, DIVERS INSTRUMENTYS MAKYNG MYN-
STRALSY WITH ECHE OTHER IN AL MANER WAVES.

THIRD EDITION



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B. H.

INTERPLAY

PART I

CHAPTER I

MARGARET TRESSIDER was seated on the sofa of the drawing-room in No. 30 Old Queen Street, Westminster. She was busily employed in arranging a hat. She sang as she worked, and seemed to be in excellent health and spirits; and when the subtleties of the hat demanded that she should place it on her head and consult the wisdom and experience of the looking-glass, she sprang up with a joyous alertness belonging rather to a girl of twenty than to a woman of nearly forty. She pinched the brim here, squeezed the flowers there, and twisted the ribbon anywhere, with an audacity possible only to an expert, and she was just nodding to herself approvingly and saying aloud: "You'll do, Margaret, my girl," when the door was softly opened and a man put his head shyly in.

"Come in, Paul," Margaret said, nodding to him.

Paul Stilling came in, and shut the door after him. He wore a long apron, and carried under his arm the back of a fiddle. He had the head of a fiddle in his right hand. He showed it eagerly to Margaret.

"Look here," he said, with curious excitement. "This is what I've been doing in the night. The best scroll I've ever made."

He stood in the centre of the room staring fixedly at his handiwork. The world had died to him. Margaret waited. Then at last she said:

"It is a beautiful scroll, Paul. I don't wonder you're proud of it."

He turned to her with sudden sulkiness.

"You don't know anything about it," he said.

And he hid it in the pocket of his apron and stole out of the room.

Margaret Tressider did not seem astonished at his abrupt disappearance. She touched the bell, and when Quong, the Chinaman, answered it, she said :

"Quong, did Mr Stilling eat his breakfast this morning?"

"No," Quong replied, shaking his head gravely, "not a clumb. Must be heap hungry."

"Well, put some dates on his work bench," said Margaret. "If he sees them amongst his tools, he will probably pick them up and be tempted to eat them. He can't resist dates, can he? It's a good thing there are dates in the world, Quong. I don't know what I should order for him on these difficult days."

Quong was retreating in his usual noiseless fashion when Margaret detained him.

"Mr Tressider is coming at twelve o'clock," she said. "It is nearly that now. Be sure and bring him straight in here. Don't disturb Mrs Rivers."

Then she pushed the hat and trimmings aside, threw a forgotten, half-smoked cigarette into the grate, and leaned back in the big arm-chair.

"Brother William, Brother William," she said aloud, smiling, "I do wonder what sort of an alligator you've grown into after seven years!"

She had not a long time in which to reflect on this problem, for exactly as Big Ben was striking twelve the door was opened once more, and Quong ushered in the expected visitor.

William Tressider was a prosperous-looking man, who appeared to have reconciled the best advantages of this world with the choicest probabilities of the next. This was the legend written on his important face, with its pompous nose. He bore a certain physical resemblance to his sister; but the spirit which looked out from her eyes could claim

no kinship with that which did duty for spirit and spied out of his mean little eyes. These two people must always have been strangers. The passage of time could neither have accentuated nor modified their entire separation. Margaret rose to greet him with a smile which was a mixture of good nature and critical curiosity.

"How do you do, Willie?" she said. "Let me take your hat from you."

"Thank you, Margaret," he answered. "I hope you are quite well, and enjoying this mild January."

"Yes, I'm quite well, though I never did care for a mild winter," she said. "Pray be seated. Do take the arm-chair. Won't you have a cigar?"

"Much obliged, but I do not smoke," William Tressider said frigidly. He had slipped into the arm-chair near the fire, and now sat with his hands folded before him. He coughed once or twice, but made no attempt to begin the serious discourse which he had been rehearsing on his way from the County and Westminster Bank in Lothbury. Margaret broke the silence, which was embarrassing to him, but only amusing to her. She began:

"It is a long time since we met, isn't it? About six or seven years, I think?"

"Yes, about seven years, I believe," he answered, a little uneasily.

"Yes," continued Margaret genially. "I remember calling at the Bank and being unreasonable enough to ask for help."

"Ah," said William Tressider, reassured, "you recognise now that you were unreasonable and that I had my own responsibilities and burdens."

"Yes, I've learnt better now," went on Margaret, with added pleasantness in her manner. "I've picked up some wisdom since then. One must. Of course it was absurd of me. But I was so fearfully hungry. And hunger makes one indiscreet. You see I'd been underfed for weeks, for months. Heavens, I am glad to have enough to eat nowadays! I make up for lost time, too. Food is a splendid invention."

William coughed once more and glanced furtively at his sister. She surprised him. She was not the same as she had been six or seven years ago. Her manner, her voice, her appearance had changed. To his amazement he found himself almost nervous of beginning to talk with her on a subject the importance of which had alone prompted this visit. But at last he began :

"No doubt, Margaret," he said gravely, "you are wondering why I have come to call on you?"

"Well, really, I hadn't thought seriously about it," she answered. "Being an old traveller, I am always ready for the unexpected."

She took a cigarette and lit it. William Tressider watched her with silent but eloquent disapproval.

"Well," she added, arranging the cushion comfortably for herself, "and what is it?"

"Information has reached me that Mrs Rivers is a divorced person," William Tressider said with stern pompousness.

"Ah," said Margaret, "so that's it."

A slight smile passed over her face.

"I have felt it to be my duty," continued William, "to remonstrate with you for holding the position of companion to a woman of doubtful reputation."

"May I ask what you consider to be a doubtful reputation?" Margaret asked cheerfully.

"I should have thought that it was quite unnecessary for me to have to define the expression," William remarked severely. "A divorced person is a divorced person."

"Even as an alligator is an alligator," said Margaret pensively. "Yes, that's true enough."

William Tressider started a little; but the thoughtfulness of Margaret's face reassuring him, he went on :

"Your relations are deeply concerned about the matter. Your position is thought to be a serious one. You must, of course, understand that no one wants for a moment to insinuate anything against your own personal character and conduct."

He put up his hand in solemn accentuation of the value of his words, and Margaret said :

"I'm sure that's very generous."

"Oh no, not at all," he broke in, quite misinterpreting her manner. "We realise that you only took this situation from motives of expediency. • You probably did not then know that Mrs Rivers was a divorced woman. By the way, did you know?"

Margaret smiled angelically; but an unseraphic gleam came into her eyes, and she did not answer that question.

"And what leads you to suppose that Mrs Rivers is divorced?" she asked instead, pleasantly enough.

William Tressider paused before replying.

"I am not at liberty to give the source of my information," he said slowly. "My position as Bank Manager opens to me many channels of accurate knowledge. I can only state that I have learnt by a curious chance that Mrs Rivers is a divorced person, and that the half-witted man who lives under her roof is the half-brother of her dead lover."

"You astonish me," Margaret said with mock surprise.

"Ah," said William cheerfully, "I felt almost sure that you did not know. I have all along insisted on this to Aunt Caroline. She is greatly distressed about you. You know she has always cherished a warm regard for you, although you have not returned her affection. She wishes to see you. She is most anxious to find you a more desirable post. Indeed, it was at her express wish that I went yesterday to several of the best agencies to make inquiries about some good situations.

"Really how very kind," said Margaret sweetly.

"No, no, you must not say that," continued William, smiling for the first time. "It is only my duty. I have here a list of six or seven promising openings. I thought it better to come prepared with something definite to suggest."

"Has Aunt Caroline still got that unfortunate down-trodden companion of hers?" asked Margaret, still amiably.

"Miss Sparrow is still with her," said William with a sudden mental start. He glanced at his sister uneasily, but

saw only a smiling face which reassured him that all was going well ; and when she stretched out her hand for the list of situations, he became convinced that all apprehension was superfluous, and that the weight of his character and influence had as usual won the day.

His mind being thus at rest, he allowed himself the distraction of glancing around, whilst Margaret was engaged in studying the agents' letters and lists. He noticed first the beautiful view of St James's Park framed by the large windows, and then he saw a tastefully furnished room, a few lovely landscapes, fresh flowers everywhere, green ferns carefully tended, inviting books on the table, a soft green carpet which looked exactly like a meadow, and soft white curtains peeping out from the shelter of rich green hangings: a harmonious whole which gave the sense of rest and cheerfulness combined. On the piano there was the photograph of a beautiful woman. William wondered whether that was Mrs Rivers herself. He would have wished to ask ; but Lothbury dignity forbade. But he reflected that the person who owned this room could not be vulgar. That at least was some consolation. - He was continuing his quiet survey of the surroundings when Margaret interrupted him.

"Ah, this one sounds promising, doesn't it," she said. " 'Wanted as companion to an elderly lady living in the strictest retirement in the country, a gentlewoman of good manners and address, conversant with French, German, and Italian. Must be good needlewoman, good reader, good musician. Age 40. Salary £30. Five pounds more given if able to cook at an emergency.' Rather good, isn't it? It quite takes my fancy. It's really rather subtle, that, 'if able to cook at an emergency.' "

"And you can cook, I remember," William said.

"Yes," said Margaret, "I can cook. Sweets and savouries, anything you like."

"And that is exactly your age, forty," William went on triumphantly.

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"Yes, that's my age," replied Margaret, "forty last birthday."

"Well, then, we can write and apply now," William said with a business-like air.

"No, we won't," Margaret answered quietly. "Do you know what we are going to do with all these absurd papers? We are going to put them in the fire."

She got up leisurely, and, without any signs of impatience or irritation, threw the whole bundle into the fire. She had not hurried herself in the doing of this; but William was so astounded that he could take no means of preventing her from carrying out her intention. He could only stare at her as she leaned against the mantelpiece and faced him.

"But, Margaret," he began. "You——"

"Now look here, William," she said. "I've listened to you because you have been amusing and interesting me. I haven't seen any one of your species for years. If you hadn't amused me, I should have asked you to be good enough to go. But whilst you've been thinking that you were making an impression on me, I've been laughing at you. You've been rather rude, you know. But I forgive you. You have not meant it. Relations have a wonderful natural gift of being rude to each other and taking undue liberties with each other's purses, time, and temperament. You see, I took a liberty with your purse when I asked you to help me with money. You felt it to be a liberty, and you practically told me to move on. Now you take a liberty with my temperament, when you come and prescribe for my moral conduct. No, you need not move on yet. I wish to give you and that meddlesome old wretch Aunt Caroline my answer about Harriet Rivers."

But William Tressider had risen from the chair, taken up his coat and hat, and evidently had no intention of listening further to Margaret's frank statements. His surprise had passed into indignation and ruffled pride, but he kept his temper well under control and said with cold severity:

"I have no wish to hear your answer, Margaret. It is

useless for me to remain longer, wasting my valuable time on a person who is amusing herself at my expense. Good morning."

"Good-bye, Willie," she said, holding out her hand.

He looked at it, hesitated a moment, and then touched it with his finger tips.

"Perhaps I ought to hear you," he said. "I owe it to our family interests."

He put down his coat and hat, and returned to his former place by the fire.

Margaret took the chair opposite him, and leaned forward eagerly, her hands clutching her knees. It was curious to see the uncompromising attitude of the brother, who thought it his duty to listen, and the intense eagerness of the sister who desired to tell her tale.

She began without any preliminaries.

"This is what you can tell Aunt Caroline," she said, "and the whole circle of tender inquiring family-friends. Tell them that for years I've knocked about in cheap lodgings, cheap boarding-houses, working at a cheap rate, wearing cheap clothes, thinking cheap thoughts. I had no comfort on the physical side, no encouragement on the mental. My portion in life had always been dead dulness. It was thought to be an unalterable law of nature that whatever happened to the other members of the family, Margaret should remain poor and always have a dull time which she must endure as a matter of course. But one morning, Willie, I woke up with a grim determination. I might have to continue being poor, but I vowed I would not go on being dull. So I threw up what they call gentility, and I shipped off to Rio as stewardess. Since then I've done and been all manner of things out in the big world. I've taken in washing, given French, German, English literature lessons, I've tried my hand at massage, I've given dancing lessons, I've practised medicine and palmistry. Nothing paid so well as the palmistry. It had to be a very poor town in the West of America where I could not shovel in quite a large number of

dollars in the course of two or three days. Well, one morning when I was in San Diego, in Southern California, a knock came at my office door, and in strolled a handsomely dressed woman of queenly presence. I saw with a thrill of pleasure that she was English. 'I've come to have my hands read,' she said. 'I hope you won't tell me very dreadful things, though! Her English voice seemed familiar to me, I supposed simply because it was English. But no! That wasn't the reason. We stared at each other. 'Margaret!' she cried, 'Harriet!' I cried. She was my old school-friend, Harriet Langton."

She paused a moment, and William Tressider, interested in spite of himself, said condescendingly :

"That was rather remarkable."

"Yes, wasn't it?" Margaret went on. "Well, we did not accomplish much palmistry. She wanted me to read her hands, but I told her I was not seriously interested in the subject, and had only taken it up because it was the easiest means of getting a livelihood, and because I was worn out and bored to death with all the humdrum ways. Then she asked to hear my history, which I told her. And what do you think she said? Ah, I shall never forget that morning. I was born again that morning. Yes, I was born again. She said: 'Poor old girl, you have had a dull time of it. Deadly, deadly dull. No wonder you don't care what becomes of you. But it must not go on. Look here. Throw up the whole thing, and come and be my companion. I myself am a——'"

Margaret broke off.

"Yes, yes," said William impatiently.

"'Am lonely,'" continued Margaret, who had seen his eagerness and had been warned by it. 'I'll give you £400 a year, and something valuable in addition. For I'll make a vow never to tyrannise over you, nor patronise you.'"

"Her offer must have been dictated by some serious circumstance in her own affairs," remarked William thoughtfully. "Was that so?"

Margaret did not heed his question.

"We burnt the palmistry and clairvoyance books," she went on, "and the fortune-telling cards. Later on, we threw the crystal into San Diego Bay. I went away with her at once. That is five years ago. I've had five splendid years of freedom, liveliness and happiness. Rather a difference from Aunt Caroline's attitude towards poor little Sparrow-bird, isn't it?"

"There would appear to be some difference," William conceded reluctantly.

"I should think there was indeed," Margaret said. "Why, I am as happy as the day is long. All the best in my nature has sprung into flower because I am properly treated. I scarcely know myself. I used to be very bitter."

"Yes," he said with emphasis. "You used to be very bitter. Your angry state of mind always distressed me."

Margaret laughed softly. She decided that Brother William was thoroughly entertaining. It was ungrateful to be annoyed with him, or even indignant. So she added with complete good-nature :

"And now, if I wanted to return to that condition of mind which always distressed you, I couldn't, for love or money. I shall never be bitter again. Harriet healed me for all time, not only with what she did for me, but with the manner of the doing. And that is the whole secret of the healing."

She paused for a moment, and William remained silent.

"So now, Willie," she continued, "you know what I think of Harriet Rivers. And you can go to Mecklenburgh Square and tell Aunt Caroline that I shall not leave her until she sends me away. I have the greatest regard for her, and the greatest belief in her. Also you, as an astute Bank Manager, must admit that £400 a year is better business than £30 a year, even with £5 extra for emergency cooking."

"There are of course advantages in the former arrangement, if you are merely looking at the monetary side of the question," William remarked solemnly. "But as I stated

before, Mrs Rivers's generosity in the matter of salary must have been dictated by some serious circumstance in her own affairs. People do not give salaries of four hundred a year for nothing. This new piece of information would seem to corroborate the misgivings which brought me here. But I own I should like to hear the truth from your own lips."

"If you know for certain already, why should you wish confirmation from me?" Margaret asked quietly. "However I may as well tell you that you will learn nothing from me, either one way or the other. Whether Mrs Rivers is divorced or not divorced is her own affair, not yours or mine. Your best plan would be to ask her, herself. It is obviously such a personal matter, that the only fair course is to go to headquarters."

William had risen once more, and turning to her, said with some dignity:

"You are impossible, Margaret. But I see that I have no power to influence you. If at any time you should regret your decision to remain on with—with this—with Mrs Rivers, you will find me ready to help you. I hope I also am not bitter."

"Thank you, Willie," she said, and she held out her hand, which he took and kept abstractedly.

"One point I must ask you to concede," he said, a curious little apologetic smile circling around his lips. "I must ask you to call on Aunt Caroline. She expects you. She believes in the weight of my influence—and—and—well—to be frank—worldly considerations demand that I should not fail in carrying out her wishes."

Margaret laughed a good-natured laugh.

"I'll certainly go and see her," she answered. "I have no wish to injure your prospects, Willie. Tell her I shall come as soon as possible. I suppose she stays always in the house, and has a horrid little dog and a salaried doctor as usual."

William answered with grave reticence that there was no visible change in Aunt Caroline's habits or establishment, except that the old doctor had died and a new one had taken

his place. He thanked Margaret for granting his request, and made his way to the door. There he stopped and glanced around the room.

"You have a pretty room," he said, "green and restful. And the view is exceedingly beautiful. In the spring it must be entrancing."

"It is entrancing in all the seasons," Margaret said.

His eyes were attracted again to the photograph on the piano, but he thought it more dignified to refer to the instrument rather than to the face.

"A Steinway, I observe," he said approvingly. "Nothing can beat a Steinway."

"Mrs Rivers thinks that," Margaret said. "She is a great musician."

"That is a beautiful face," William ventured, pointing vaguely to the photograph, with a subtle aloofness assumed to veil his curiosity. "One of your friends, I presume?"

"It is Harriet herself," Margaret said.

"Ah," he said severely. "Well, good-bye, Margaret."

At that moment a voice was heard singing in the hall:

"I will pass by, and see their happiness
And envy none--being just as great, no doubt,
Useful to men and dear to God as they!"

The door opened, and Harriet Rivers came joyously into the room, but seeing a stranger, her song died on her lips. She was carrying an armful of fresh flowers.

"I am sorry to interrupt," she said, putting down the flowers and turning first to Margaret and then to William Tressider, who stood arrested by this unexpected vision of charm and beauty. "I did not know you had a guest, Margaret. I'll be off again."

"No, don't go, Harriet," Margaret said. "This is my brother, William."

There was a twinkle in Margaret's eye, and she was evidently enjoying the situation. She felt tempted to tease William by saying: 'Now here is Harriet herself. Why not

ask her that question?' But she maintained a suitable silence, whilst Harriet in the kindest manner possible welcomed the man who had been lately engaged in the ungenerous task of probing into her history.

"I am sure Margaret's brother is most welcome, most welcome," she said warmly. "But don't hurry away. I am so glad to have the chance of telling you how good she is to me. I don't know what I should do without her."

William had taken her outstretched hand and bowed stiffly over it. He now coughed pompously, expressed his regrets that business in the City compelled him to hasten off, and was preparing once more to escape from this house to which he had been led by duty only, when the door was opened violently and his astonished eyes beheld a dirty man shabbily dressed and wearing a workman's apron. He was waving in one hand a fiddle-head, and with the other he was munching at a string of dates. He ran straight up to Harriet Rivers and said excitedly :

"Harriet, this scroll is the best bit of work I've ever done. Look at it. It's working out splendidly. It's going to be bold and noble. You can see for yourself that——"

He suddenly realised there was a stranger present. He at once hid his treasure in his apron and rushed out of the room.

There was a brief moment of silence which Harriet Rivers broke. She turned to William Tressider and said quite simply :

"We owe you a word of explanation about this strange little episode."

To her astonishment and Margaret's indignation he raised his hand in stern rebuke and answered :

"Pardon me, but no explanation is necessary. Good morning."

CHAPTER II

FOR a long time after Brother William's stern departure the two friends sat together over the fire discussing the ill chance which had put him on the track of Harriet Rivers's past. For she was a divorced woman, and the half-witted man living under her roof was her dead lover's step-brother. William Tressider had learned the truth, which they were not actively concealing from the world, but which they were not desirous of proclaiming from the house-tops. Harriet held that a woman had the right to pass on. She had passed on.

Margaret's case was different. She had broken no social or moral law; nevertheless she had been in dire need of a new life, and as she told her brother, it was Harriet Rivers who gave her a fresh start. At the right moment for the rescue of the best and finest part of her nature, Harriet had appeared and held out an unhesitating hand. Up to that time Margaret had made a brave fight with circumstance; but she was conscious that the thin partition which separates good from evil, uprightness from shoddiness, fair dealing from trickery, was breaking down within her. She knew that she would not be able to stop at palmistry. Palmistry was only the first step in trickery; and there were days when she was haunted by a vision of what she herself would be—physically and mentally—in eight or ten years dated from that period of her life. She would have passed through the stages of dealer in herbs and complexion remedies, mental healer, magnetic healer, quack doctor, quack anything. She had travelled once in the company of such a woman. She was about fifty-three; well-set-up, well dressed, bright, full of information and resource, conversant with all the weak points of human nature, learned in jewels and curios, something of

a conjurer, something of a spiritualist, with real gifts and instincts of alertness—and yet shoddy to the core: shoddy in action, in appearance, in thought. Margaret did not pretend that she could claim all these talents for her own; but she knew herself to be drifting as one of the rank and file into that sorry regiment of which that woman was a captain. She knew also that she could not return to her former condition of hunger and dulness. Anything was better than that. So there was no choice but to go on. Then Harriet came and changed everything for her, in a few words, in a few minutes. And who shall dare say that the age of miracles is over as long as one single human being can work a wonder for another human being?

Thus Margaret rose up, strong and whole, her heart filled full with loyalty and gratitude, and prepared to stand by Harriet against a whole world of accusing judges. From the moment she burnt her palmistry books and threw her crystal into San Diego Bay, she devoted her liberated mind to the delightful profession of being happy and making happy: no difficult task in Harriet's atmosphere.

She found her old school friend generous-hearted and lovable as she had ever been, quick-tempered and emotional, subject to occasional outbreaks of anger followed by immediate penitences, simple and uncalculating, and entirely unable to look after her own interests.

Harriet's history was briefly this. Her mother had died almost immediately after giving birth to the little girl. Her father, a man of parts and a gifted musician, had brought her up himself, and in his own erratic way had taken care of her, fostering her great love of music and ministering to the joyfulness of her nature. They had been a happy pair of comrades. But he died when she was fourteen years of age, and by a curious error of judgment left her in the charge of a worthy but narrow-minded relative. The truth was that at the last he had been seized with a sudden panic about his upbringing of his little girl. He wanted to be sure that she was in safe hands. So wishing only the best for her,

But that was three years ago, and since then he had grown into his surroundings, grown into that room, filled it with voices which spoke to him only, peopled it with the true comrades of his own spirit, and lived his life there in his gentle, harmless way. And here was Margaret, disquieted by Brother William's visit, trying to impress on Harriet that Paul must go, that his presence in the house was a menace to their peace of mind and a hindrance to the realisation of their hopes.

"For you know, Harriet," she urged, "my dearest wish is that Captain Bending will propose to you and that you'll accept him."

Harriet remained silent.

"William has always been a nuisance," Margaret continued. "I might have known that he would come on the scenes when he was not wanted. He has always had the habit of poking his pompous nose in somewhere at the wrong time. Self-righteous old alligator! I can't bear to think that any trouble should come to you through a relative of mine—through me, in fact."

"Nonsense," said Harriet gaily. "You're not responsible for Brother William. Do you know, I rather liked Brother William, even though he didn't approve of me. - And that shocked expression on his face when Paul appeared! I wouldn't have missed it for anything. Virtuous Methodist indignation. Don't I know it! My guardians were Methodists. It is obvious to me that Brother William is also one of that gay, gay sect. Isn't he? No? Oh yes, surely! Come now, Margaret, don't look so tragic. What harm can he do to me in the long run?" *

"Don't you see, Harriet, the whole point is really this," Margaret said gravely. "William did not know any facts for certain. He was trying all the time to make me commit myself to some statement. He had heard rumours, and he wanted to have them corroborated. He would have gone away in doubt if Paul had not appeared suddenly amongst us. Well, it is obvious to me from this one incident only that Paul ought to leave us."

She paused, but Harriet, who had drawn up nearer to the fire, made no reply. Margaret went on :

"Captain Bending loves you, and you love him. He is the very man for you. He is your answer to life. You mustn't lose him."

Harriet turned round to her friend and said with great sadness :

"He is my answer to life ; but I've found him too late. That's how it will work out. If I could have found him when I was younger, I should have been a different woman, with a different history."

"But you have all your life before you still," Margaret urged. "I am convinced that a great happiness is in store for you. Only there is no sense in jeopardising it. If Bending speaks to you, it will be time enough then to tell him your history. But that is rather different from writing the legend over your own doorway. Surely you must see that."

"Yes, I do see that," Harriet admitted reluctantly.

"Also when Paul came to us, we had no idea that life was going to open out in this unexpected way," Margaret insisted. "That makes a great difference."

"Yes, that's true," Harriet said. "I never dreamed that love could enter my heart again. I thought I had put it aside together with my mistakes. And suddenly he appeared. I shall never forget that morning at Tromsø when they welcomed him back. How glad he was for our English greeting ! It was a thrilling moment, wasn't it ?"

"Yes," said Margaret warmly. "How they cheered him ! And how gallant he looked, didn't he ?"

"Yes," Harriet said. "Every inch a sailor—every inch a hero."

"Do you remember how he pointed to his comrades, raised his hat to them, and presented them, as it were, to the crowd ? He wasn't going to leave them out of it," Margaret said. "A brave heart, and a generous spirit. Easy enough to learn that at once."

The picture rose before Harriet's eyes. In the background the mountains with their glaciers touching the water's edge. Craft of every kind crowding round the *Canute* safely returned after three years' absence in the Polar regions. The little tug *Dagmar* landing at the quay. The nine Arctic explorers with their fearless leader. 'An Englishman, with an English sailor's frank and open face.

The moment came back to her tenfold intensified. She rose excitedly and flung her arms over her head.

"I can't bear to lose him," she cried passionately.

"Then Paul will have to go," her friend answered quietly.

Harriet went to the window where she stood for a few moments in silence looking abstractedly at the beautiful Park of St James spread before her. Memories of the past crowded over her, but it was not they which forbade her to dismiss Paul. She could have taken the responsibility of Paul in a dozen impersonal ways and yet have fulfilled the spirit of her lover's dying wishes. She harboured no false sentiment in connection with the trust which he had placed in her kindness and consideration. It would have been impossible for her to fail him even though he were dead. But she recognised that she had the right to her own methods; and it was not Robert Stilling who was urging her on behalf of Paul—it was Paul himself, that gentle, strange being who needed protection and care, and was as unfit as any little child to tread life's path alone. He had made silent appeal to the maternal pitifulness in her, dormant in every woman and gratefully responded to by every woman. It had become a necessity to her to watch over his welfare.

She told Margaret this. She told her that she preferred to take her chance, and that if she lost Captain Bending, well then she lost him, and she preferred to mourn for him all her days rather than turn her back on Paul. She said that she did not in any case deserve to have the great happiness of being loved by a gallant and splendid man like Captain Bending, but that she would deserve it still less if she stifled in herself the best instinct of human nature—the sense of

protectiveness. She spoke for a long time and with a flood of words. When she ceased, the tears stood in Margaret's eyes. The unworldliness of Harriet's spirit always touched her.

"I will not bother you any more about Paul," she said gently. "We will do the best we can with the old Sign Post. But to satisfy me, let us go upstairs to his room, and try in some way or other to hear from his own lips whether he is really as happy and contented as you think. Yes, I know it is stupid of me to ask this, but I can't help having a matter-of-fact mind. And there would not be any sense in your sacrificing yourself for nothing, though that's what most people do in life."

They mounted to the big room at the top of the house and knocked outside several times before Paul at length bade them come in. The sun was shining into the cheerful workshop which had been so comfortably arranged by Harriet's thoughtfulness. Pretty curtains framed the windows which looked on to the Park; a comfortable couch banked one of the walls; an easy chair nestled up to the fireside; two or three hardy plants were sheltered in the casement; and yet these little touches of ease and grace had not been allowed to interfere with the real meaning of Paul's haven. Slabs of wood were stacked on a long shelf. Fiddle-backs, necks, ribs, bellies and heads were lying about on the floor. Several entire fiddles, some of them brand new, and others obviously old, were hanging on the walls or were propped up in the corners. Mysterious knives, planes, carving gouges, chisels, callipers, cramps, strange-looking bottles, differently varnished strips of wood, and fragments of sand paper were all jumbled together in orderly confusion on the big work bench. Paul himself was sitting at a smaller bench holding in one hand the fiddle-back at which he was working, and with the other hand pressing his lips together in the deepest abstraction. The two women did not disturb him at once. They knew well that he disliked to be spoken to suddenly. Harriet busied herself with the plants, and Margaret took charge

of the fire and heaped on the coals. It was she who eventually began the conversation.

"Paul, what about that scroll?" she asked. "Are you not going to show it to us?"

"Yes," he answered. "Who was that horrid-looking man downstairs?"

"He was my brother," Margaret replied gravely.

"Ah," said Paul, "you couldn't help that, of course. No one could."

"Imagine," Harriet said, "he came to suggest that Margaret should leave us. What do you think of that for an absurd idea, Paul?"

Paul put down the maple 'back' and looked up at her.

"Yes, that was absurd," he said simply. "As if anyone would leave here. The thing isn't possible, is it?"

"No, it isn't possible," Margaret answered, with great gentleness in her voice. "You are right, Paul."

And a few minutes later they left him alone in his quiet and busy happiness.

CHAPTER III

THAT same night, when it had been definitely decided that Paul should stay, Harriet, unable to sleep, lived over again her first meeting with Captain Bending at Tromsö. She and Margaret had been touring in the ordinary way in Norway, and at Trondhjem fell in with a Norwegian High School teacher, herself a native of Tromsö, who was going there by mail-boat and who persuaded them that if they really wished to see the true glories of Norway they should settle down in Tromsö, and from that centre explore the lonely and wild beauty of the 'Nordland.' Being of a sociable disposition, she suggested that they should travel with her and have the benefit of her experience, in exchange, as it were, for the opportunity they gave her of airing her admirable English. So they went with her, and had the greatest pleasure in her company. She unfolded to them the legends of the country, and pointed out the rocks and islands and mountains as her own familiar friends. Finally, she deposited them at Fru Andersen's little hotel in Tromsö two or three days before the return home of the Orchardson Polar Expedition, of which Edward Bending was the leader.

Now, up to that time, Polar expeditions had held no place on their list of life's significances; but, caught by the enthusiasm and expectation of the inhabitants, Margaret and Harriet found themselves taking an interested part in the preparations which were being made in honour of the return of the *Canute*. For although Tromsö was accustomed to these Arctic enterprises, which indeed belonged to her very existence, this Orchardson expedition was supposed to have excelled all others in daring and hardihood, was said to have succeeded in reaching the record latitude of 86 degrees, 33

minutes N., was reported to have made exceedingly valuable contributions to oceanographic science, and had won for itself the applauding tribute of public opinion even in *blasé* Tromsø.

So Tromsø kept special festival. The word went round that the *Canute* was coming. Tromsø was not going to be outdone by Hammerfest, which had 'put itself in festal array from the sea to the highest hill-top. Norwegian and English flags waved from the flagstaffs in the town and the masts in the harbour. Many different kinds of craft had gathered together—steamers black with people, trading vessels, cargo boats, and every description of fishing boat. Cheers and acclamations filled the air.

The little tug *Dagmar*, gaily decorated for her honourable task, landed the heroes on the quay. The Mayor of the town, the Bishop of the Nordland, the various vice-consuls, the councillors and other representative people stood in front of the excited crowd ready to welcome the heroes officially. The usual contingent of Lapp men, women, babies, and dogs hung around. Flags, hats, handkerchiefs were waved frantically. When Captain Bending stepped ashore, he was greeted with ringing hurrahs, amongst which his ears detected an English note. He glanced eagerly in the direction from which that welcome music came, and saw two good-looking Englishwomen standing together in front of the crowd. A smile of keen pleasure lit up his pleasant face. He stopped almost involuntarily. "*Thank you, thank you,*" he said, "*what a splendid thing to see one's own countrymen again!*" Then he turned away from them, and gave himself up to the pleasure of his official welcome.

But it had been a thrilling moment; and there was another thrilling moment later in the day when Margaret and Harriet, returning home after an excursion to the Laplanders' settlement in the Tromsdal, found their quiet little hotel overrun by the explorers, Bending himself being amongst the number. He was standing at the entrance talking to Fru Kjaever, a business woman in the whaling trade, who on their first arrival had made friends with the two

English strangers and had unfolded to them some of the joys and trials attendant on her unusual calling. She now beckoned to them in imperative fashion and sang out in her excellent English: "Ladies, ladies, I present you to your distinguished countryman, the Captain Bending." Bending took off his hat and said: "Too late, too late, Fru Kjaever. We've already introduced ourselves, haven't we?"

This was the beginning of an agreeable comradeship which the remoteness of the little Northern town and the curious atmosphere of the life easily fostered. Tourists came, looked around, and passed on immediately to the North Cape; but they, of course, could form no idea of the composition of the community in which Harriet and Margaret by a strange chance of circumstance now found themselves.

The two Englishwomen were endlessly amused by and interested in the odds and ends of people who were gathered together there on business, or had drifted thither by inclination, or had been detained as remnants by Fate. Bending, who knew these types by heart, was able to give the key to their meaning. The Russian ornithologist, the Madagascar missionary and his interpreter, the merchants in fur and wood, a Finnish botanist, the exporters of dried fish, Fru Kjaever, the whale-lady, a politician under a cloud, a historian of the Laplanders, explorers belonging to other expeditions, a French engineer, two aeronauts, a collector of Northern folk-lore, and the jovial old captain of the provision ship *Frithjof*—these, and several others of more nondescript pattern, were quartered in Fru Andersen's hotel, the Grand Hotel, run by a company, being left severely alone by everyone except tourists, who were outside the pale of Arctic salvation.

The whale-lady impressed on Harriet and Margaret one day that the Grand Hotel would have been their sad fate if they had not been rescued at Trondhjem by the Norwegian teacher, and thus been given the rare chance of gleanings accurate information on the subject of blubber and bottle-nose whales.

"Think of what you have missed," Bending laughed.

"Certainly no rescue party ever did better work than that sensible girl. Where is she? I should like to drink the damsel's health."

"She went to the Lyngen Fjord," Harriet said. "We were to follow later. We wanted to be here to welcome you all back."

"Something new for them, Captain, to see explorers," Fru Kjaever put in. "But not new for her. She was born here. She said explorers bored her. She had heard enough of their adventures. She complained that they were always being lost, and always turning up again. And always making the same fuss. I agreed with her. That has been my experience of them. I, too, am tired of explorers."

"Don't you believe her," Bending said. "She'd come and rescue us in one of her best whalers. She's a humbug. She loves blubber, but she'd sacrifice all the blubber in the world to save one explorer."

"Don't you believe your countryman," Fru Kjaever said, shaking her head. "I repeat, I am tired of heroes. They bore me. It is good to be with the mild little Madagascar missionary. He has no courage. It is a pleasure to see his timid face. I go to gaze on it now. Farewell."

They looked after her and laughed. Every one in that community liked Fru Kjaever.

"She must be punished," Bending said, with a twinkle in his bright eye. "A subtle punishment, too. She loves your beautiful playing as much as I do, Mrs Rivers. And we'll have some of it now in her absence. There! I've opened the cracked old piano. I don't know how you can manage to get such lovely notes out of such a decrepit old craft. But I could listen all day long."

Then Harriet sat down to the crippled old instrument in the little drawing-room of the hotel, and by her magic touch persuaded it to give forth delicious music. Bending listened, as always, in quiet delight, held by the spell of her playing, and the charm of her personality.

His face had become more restful since he came ashore. The drawn, anxious expression characteristic of a man who

has been undertaking great responsibilities of enterprise, had yielded to an easier adjustment. His natural happiness of disposition was asserting itself more and more each day. He was not really good-looking in the sense of having fine features; but his countenance, being that of the typical English sailor, was necessarily attractive. He had a reckless, dare-devil sort of bearing. One would have known at a glance that this man never counted the cost of what he did or what he was. He owned a pair of dark brown eyes, with a devil in each of them, and dark hair turning now to grey. His smile was mischievously engaging. Even his sister-in-law, the cultured Mrs Ermytrude Bending, confessed that Edward's smile had sometimes modified her somewhat severe opinion of his character. He was of medium height and rather broad, well planted on his feet, and yet ready for instant action, destined both by stature and temperament for those dashing exploits which are the natural expression of eager adventurous spirits. His manner was exceedingly simple and direct. When he was speaking of some of the expedition's experiences, a certain boyishness, permanently resident in all brave men of action, leapt out and claimed from his hearers a responsive understanding such as children give each other in their pirate days.

This was the man whom Harriet loved instantly and understood by instinct. Her father, a rover by nature, her mother sprung from an old navy family, held out their hands to her from the past, offering her the key of her inheritance. She took it and unlocked the inner sanctuary of Edward Bending's heart.

Margaret saw what was happening and rejoiced, but she kept her own counsel, until one midnight when she and the other members of their little company went out for a boating picnic. Fru Kjaever glanced at the Captain's face and whispered:

"Your countryman is falling in love with your country-woman."

"Yes, I know," Margaret replied. "Can you wonder?"

"You have a generous spirit," the whale-lady said. "You might have been jealous. You also are attractive. I think if I'd been Herr Bending, I should have chosen you. But what would the interpreter have done? For there is no doubt he has his grim eye on you. He told me he didn't dislike you, and that you had a brain! I have known him for many years, and I assure you that this much from him is a passionate confession. I didn't wonder at it. I have learnt, Miss Tressider, to wonder at nothing—except this mysterious light when the midnight sun hides itself. Isn't it a lovely and mystic scene?"

As she spoke, the pale sun rays were battling with and were baffled by the atmosphere. A few daring ones escaped from thralldom and illumined two or three of the mountain peaks, touching with a silver glimmer an edge of the glacier on the Ringvadsö. Clouds of pale grey commingling with pink and delicate blue travelled overhead or descended to meet the rising mist half-way. There were ever-changing visions of veiled loveliness, which would have called forth the poetry from any impressionable nature. The little Madagascar missionary was overpowered. With his soft musical voice he broke out into his native language and was reported by the interpreter to be improvising a poetic panegyric on the encompassing beauty.

When he had come to the end of his animated outpouring and had retired into himself, there was a respectful and sympathetic silence which Fru Kjaever at last broke.

"Ah, how much better to be a poet than an explorer, Miss Tressider," she said. "Ah, what poetry! And what a welcome change from stories of bears, walruses and ice-floes. No, thank you, Herr Interpreter. No need to translate further. Having a poetic spirit, I understand him perfectly."

"No female merchant in whales can possibly have a poetic spirit," Bending remarked, turning to Harriet.

"The Polar regions have frozen up the Captain's intellect," Fru Kjaever said to Margaret. "All intelligent people know that whales and poetry go very well together."

"But the smell, Fru Kjaever?" Harriet asked, laughing. "Surely you don't call that inspiring?"

"What smell?" she inquired with an engaging innocence. "Explain yourself, Mrs Rivers."

Then there was a chorus of merry scorn, even the grim interpreter, Herr Larsen,* giving forth a grunt which was his nearest approach to joyfulness; for it was an accepted fact that Fru Kjaever came to Tromsö from her island oil-works, not for change of scene, but for change of "scent." Only she never owned to this. And when Margaret and Harriet, urged on mischievously by Bending, tried to question her, she merely shook her head and murmured pensively:

"My poor bottle-nose friends. They are libelling you. But truth triumphs in the end."

And she added severely:

"I invite you all to my island to learn the truth. The Herr Captain can hire the *Dagmar* to-morrow and take us there."

"Anywhere but there, countrywomen," sang out Bending. "For pity's sake don't accept the invitation. All my time is yours for anywhere but there."

Indeed it seemed to be theirs, for he joined all the excursions which they planned for themselves, and added to the general enjoyment by his happy and easy companionship. But he was most pleased when they came with him to the *Canute*. Many times they steamed off to her in the grubby little tug *Olaf*, and climbing up the rope ladder against her side were handed on board by Bending himself and Jacobsen, the meteorologist. He generally chose a wet and misty day when he knew they could not go farther afield, and guessed that time might hang heavily on their hands. Then he would put his head into the little drawing-room of the hotel and call out:

"Hullo there, mi hearties! Who's for the *Canute* this forenoon, and a musical treat on the concertina?"

"I am," Harriet answered, throwing aside her embroidery.

"And I," said Margaret, snatching up her Fan-Tan cards.

"And I," said Fru Kjaever, "provided you give us hot coffee."

"And I," said the interpreter grimly, "if there's to be no concertina. Herr Gott, that instrument!"

"Ah, you have to accept the concertina as part of the ship," laughed Bending.

"Stay ashore, Herr Interpreter," said Fru Kjaever, "and go and be as disagreeable as you like with the Lapps. Go and chew angelica with them, I beg you."

"Thank you, no. I come too," the interpreter replied with decision.

For he, even as they, dearly loved visiting the *Canute*. They learnt to know every part of her, the engine-room, the chart-room, the cook's galley, and the saloon, surrounded on all sides by the sleeping cabins to protect it from external cold. Bending was never tired of explaining all her virtues as a Polar boat and her splendid construction, which had enabled her to resist any amount of ice pressure.

"Yes, yes," he was always saying proudly, "the ice came hurtling against her sides, and she didn't care a hang. Nor did we when we saw how she took it."

And he demanded of them that they should learn something about the mysterious instruments for the many different kinds of scientific observations, the hydrometers, psychrometers, water samplers, deep water thermometers and the spectro-scope specially adapted for the northern lights. Margaret came out 'top dog' over this. Harriet proved herself to be a hopeless duffer; and one day she looked at the charts upside down.

"Don't trouble yourself to explain to her," Margaret whispered to the Captain. "She always puts on that chastened expression when her brain isn't working."

"I understand," laughed Bending. "I put on that identical expression when my sister-in-law begins to talk of Aristotle and that other fellow—Schop—Schopenhauer. Begad, how it all comes back to me! And I thought I'd forgotten those old land-bores. Here, Jacobsen, hold hard with the instruments and charts. No one must have brain fever at

the end of this expedition. Off to the saloon, all of us. You there, Peter, look sharp with the coffee."

"Ah," said Fru Kjaever, with a sigh of relief, "the finest coffee in the world! Did you know, Mrs Rivers, that one can always be sure of having all the luxuries of life on a Polar expedition? Hardships of explorers! What an absurd idea! Hardships of poets, if you like!"

So they gathered together in the saloon; and over the fragrant coffee there was the usual Arctic talk. The Captain of the provision ship *Frithjof*, a real old Arctic sea dog, had joined them on this occasion, and endless discussions took place on the habits of bears and walruses, management of the dogs, currents, winds, ice drift, depth of Polar basin and the Continental Shelf. Fru Kjaever kept them in order; and when they became too specialised, she broke in:

"I thought you said there was to be no brain fever, Herr Captain Bending. Tell us some more about the sledge expedition and your fight with the bear when you found him eating up the store of blubber. That's what I like to hear."

"Yes, and how you felt when you first caught sight of land," urged Harriet. "That must have been a tremendous moment."

"Something more about the accident to the kayaks," said Margaret, "and the drifting away of the 'cooker.' I consider that to have been a tremendous moment! But then I always was keen on the kitchen."

"I'll try to satisfy all tastes," laughed Bending. "Did you notice, by the way, Mrs Rivers, that Fru Kjaever only wants to hear about blubber. Now doesn't that prove that she hasn't the poetic spirit?"

So he told them all they wished to hear, and each one present felt that stimulating excitement which comes from being in the company of a man freshly returned from a life of risk and adventure.

Then Harriet begged for the concertina, which always amused her hugely, and Fru Kjaever seconded the request and cried:

"Yes, yes, and let the Herr Interpreter go to the crows' nest if he suffers."

"No, I'll stop here and suffer," said the interpreter decidedly. "Herr Gott, what an instrument!"

But he took the hint, and only grunted occasionally when the Captain sang "Black eyed Sue" and "The Midshipmite." Bending, after two encores, put down the concertina and proposed the interpreter's health.

"Skaal to the interpreter!" he cried. "He has shown remarkable self-control."

"Skaal!" they all cried, lifting their coffee-cups and turning to the quiet grim man who smiled and said a few words in Madagascan to the little missionary. The little missionary rose, waved his hands about gently, and gave a short and mysterious oration which held the audience riveted.

"He is thanking the company on my behalf," said the interpreter. "But Fru Kjaever, who claims to have the poetic spirit, can best translate for you. No need for my services."

Ah, those were happy days, but they passed all too quickly, and the morning came when Bending had to tear himself away from this restful holiday and take up the life which was waiting for him in the world outside. Telegrams of congratulations and testimonies of goodwill had been reaching him from many parts, and now the moment had arrived when he could delay his departure no longer. His honours, his ambitions, his duties were claiming him. He was going first to England to present his accounts to the millionaire who had financed the expedition, and to lecture before the Royal Geographical Society. After that he had planned to visit America and lecture there, and finally to publish his book, "The Voyage of the *Canute*."

"Heaven help me," he said to Harriet. "I've a lot to get through that's not in my line. But I shall steer straight for Old Queen Street and turn up one morning with my concertina. May I?"

"Yes." Harriet said simply. "Of course you may."

He nodded his head, looked at her eagerly as though there

were something more he wished to say, but had not the courage.

The sun was shining brightly as they all stood together on the quay. The mists had disappeared by magic, and the snow-clad Bensjordtind revealed itself in its dazzling and lovely garb. The harbour was astir with life. A great tourist ship had arrived in the night, and also two or three vessels from Spitzbergen and Nova Zembla with goodly cargoes of seal and walrus skins. Several pointed boats, real survivals in form of the old Viking dragon, were being relieved of their load of timber logs; and down at Herr Jeremias's store-shop a brisk exchange was being made with dried fish and salted cod roe. A fur trader was putting out, bound for Archangel, and the mail steamer from Trondhjem was yielding up its treasures of letters, parcels and heterogeneous packages. On the quay the Lapps were doing a smart trade with the excited crowd of American tourists. The blueness of the sky, the crispness of the air and the beauty of the scenery called forth exclamations of delight from all sides. Very green and smiling looked Tromsø, with its slopes of fine birch trees and mountain ashes, and the valley opposite thick with the birch-woods strolling down to meet the water's edge.

Bending gave one glance around at this little Northern outpost where he had found an added and unexpected welcome, and then stepped reluctantly into the *Olaf* for the last time. His friends followed him and took leave of him alongside the beautiful yacht which had been waiting to receive him and convey him as far as Trondhjem. The *Dagmar* preceded him, towing the *Canute*. The little procession was watched and cheered until it had left the harbour and was out of sight on its way southward through the Malanger Fjord.

The three women were silent, until Fru Kjaever, anxious that the tension should be broken, attracted their notice to some heavy clouds gathering in the direction of the mountains on Ringvadsö.

"Ah," she said, "I believe we're going to have those

wretched mists again. Well, at least we've sent him off with the sunshine, haven't we? Off he goes, to be spoilt, as all the other explorers I've ever known have been spoilt. He is doomed like the rest of them, poor brave man. These North Polar men who survive, always become vain. So do the dogs who by chance return—Fru Andersen's dog, for instance. They're petted too much when they come home. No human dog could stand it, and certainly no man! Yes, yes, the Captain Bending goes to meet his doom."

"I don't believe he will be spoilt." Harriet said stoutly.

"Nor I," said Margaret equally decidedly.

The whale lady smiled.

"Nor I, dear Englishwomen," she said. "But one must talk."

CHAPTER IV

ON the day following after William's visit to Westminster, Margaret sallied forth to Aunt Caroline's house in Mecklenburgh Square where she had lived for many years under unvarying conditions of comfort and self-containedness. Margaret knew that sooner or later she would be coerced into having an interview with this old woman who since time immemorial had tyrannised over the whole family. She decided that her best plan was to go at once, assert her own independence, quietly but firmly put a stop to all interference, and then beat a permanent retreat. She dressed herself in her most elegant clothes in order to defy the enemy effectually.

Even as she went down Cockpit steps into Birdcage Walk, she began inventing severe phrases for Aunt Caroline's benefit, and laughed at herself, knowing well that she would not venture to use one of them. No one had ever dared to deal with Aunt Caroline. She belonged by mysterious dispensation to that privileged assortment of humanity best classified as unassailable. It was probable that death would come one day and strike a blow at her which she would not be able to resist: it was probable, but not likely. Meantime she maintained her subtle supremacy. Margaret came under its immediate influence as she rang the bell, as she stepped over the threshold into the gloomy hall, as she followed the sour-visaged Rachel into the sombre dining-room. She attempted to fortify herself by saying: "I will not be intimidated by this old wretch"; and yet there she waited for her summons to the presence-chamber, distinctly uneasy in her mind, and increasingly unsure of her self possession, in spite of her brave attire. She said: "I have travelled thousands of miles since I set foot in this room. That

ought to make a tremendous deal of difference. Space is a big thing, you know." But it is not a big thing when you have traversed it and the sense of its distance has fled.

Margaret soon realised that so far as space was concerned, she might never have been out of that dining-room; and she found herself staring at the great sphinx-like marble clock, with the same accumulating annoyance which it had always been able to arouse in her.

She was still being held in thraldom by this representative of Aunt Caroline's unassailability, when the door was opened, and a little depressed woman's figure stole into the room. It was Miss Sparrow, Aunt Caroline's companion. The frightened look on her face changed to a guilty little smile when she saw Margaret. Miss Sparrow had always cherished a secret affection for Aunt Caroline's fearless niece who in the past had constantly encouraged her to rebel against the old woman's tyranny. Sparrowbird had never managed to carry out this bold plan; but that anyone should even have suggested such a course of action, was some sort of an approximation to real devilry, meditation on which had often sustained and stimulated her meek soul. She therefore regarded Margaret as a friend who had done her a lasting service; and indeed if human nature has at any moment the impulse to be grateful, it would not go far wrong in showing appreciation to those people who can from time to time make us feel that we may one day be able to cope with our impossibilities.

So Miss Sparrow welcomed her secret benefactress in a way that touched up all the kindness in Margaret's heart. She glanced at the little figure which stooped more, or rather drooped: at the thin face which had now lost every trace of youthfulness: at the eyes which had no eager brightness left in them; and she compared the work which Harriet Rivers, the divorced woman, had been doing for her companion, with that which Aunt Caroline, the 'blameless spinster' had been doing for hers.

"Sparrowbird, I can see you have not been asserting your

independence properly," Margaret said shaking her head gravely. "Answer me truthfully. Have you tried to stand up to that wicked old aunt of mine all these long years I've been away? No, you haven't. I see that. You've allowed her to go on being an immoral old vampire."

"Oh, hush, hush," said Miss Sparrow, uneasily, and yet distinctly pleased.

"Have you refused to take the dog out?" continued Margaret. "Tell me that, Sparrowbird?"

"Oh, my dear, hush, hush," answered Miss Sparrow brightening up. "You really mustn't."

"That would have been your salvation, you know, insisted Margaret. "I always told you so. If you had refused to take the dog out, everything else would have been easy."

"It wasn't possible," Miss Sparrow said, the tears coming out of her eyes as she laughed. "I shouldn't have dared."

"Nor should I," said Margaret, "now that I am here and feel her influence. I suppose she is very much the same, Sparrowbird. Everything seems the same, including your fine old friends, the plane trees in the square. How bonny they look with their tassels, don't they? I hope you snatched a little leisure to go and sit under them proudly last summer."

"Not much," Miss Sparrow answered, looking lovingly at the great planes which had ever been dear to her, and which she watched with unfailing pleasure, in all their stages of bareness and luxuriance, year in, year out.

"Then Aunt Caroline has not changed in her inconsiderateness towards you," Margaret remarked.

"There is no change except that we have a new doctor," Miss Sparrow said, blushing a little. "He is exceedingly kind. He is never impatient with me when he has to wait a long time. But he is often annoyed. I wonder sometimes that he stands it."

"The money, of course," Margaret asserted. "I'm sure you needn't pity him. And he probably charges accordingly. Is he old and pompous like the other one, and ugly?"

"Oh, no," Miss Sparrow said, blushing again. "He is young—young for a successful surgeon—and he has a noble face."

"Why, I believe you've lost your heart to him!" Margaret laughed. "Oh, Sparrowbird, you sly one!"

"My dear, hush, hush," Miss Sparrow whispered, smiling a little shyly. "What would Miss Benbow say if she heard us."

"If he is a surgeon, what is he doing here?" Margaret asked. "Surgeons aren't generally family practitioners, are they?"

"Well, you see," explained Sparrowbird, "Miss Benbow had a bad throat two years ago, and old Dr Lindlay brought Dr Edgar to see her. She took a fancy to him, and when Dr Lindlay died, she suggested that Dr Edgar should fill his place. I have a sort of idea that he refused at first."

"Ah, I'm glad to hear that he hesitated," Margaret said. "That was something."

"And then I'm thankful to say he consented," Miss Sparrow said, smiling happily.

"Do you sit and talk with him all the time he is waiting for Aunt Caroline?" Margaret asked, teasing her.

"Oh no," she answered, seriously. "He always keeps a special book on History here. He reads that until I'm sent to fetch him. He comes three times a week. This is one of his days. He's up there now. No, that's his step on the stairs. He is coming down now."

Her face brightened and her manner showed real signs of eagerness as the door opened and Dr Edgar appeared.

Margaret saw at once that Miss Sparrow was right, and that he had a noble face. He bowed to her, and turned at once to the little companion.

"You'd better cut up at once," he said kindly. "Miss Benbow is rather impatient to-day. I've given her a prescription for her nerves. She really is a little out of sorts to-day."

And as Miss Sparrow flew off to her tyrant, he said to Margaret:

"You know, ordinarily Miss Benbow is as well as I am. But she ^{is} agitated about her interview with you. I think you are probably her niece—her rebellious niece?"

"Yes," said Margaret, nodding pleasantly. "I am that personage."

"Well," continued Dr Edgar, smiling, "I could not follow the whole story, but as far as I could gather from her disconnected remarks, she is bent on rescuing you from unsuitable surroundings, from a woman of doubtful reputation, and a half-witted man who makes violins. It all sounded very mysterious, and conveys even less to my mind now I have seen you. You don't appear to me to be in need of immediate rescue."

Margaret laughed. Dr Edgar sat down in the vacant arm-chair. Most people felt inclined to sit down and have a chat with her. The thought passed through Dr Edgar's mind that this was the first time he had cared to linger in that gloomy house. He was always relieved when he banged the front door after him. Now he leaned back contentedly, and, with an expectant little smile on his face, waited for Margaret to lead off.

"Is your patient well enough to bear a shock?" she asked, mischievously.

"It all depends what kind of shock," he answered.

"The shock of being told not to interfere with her niece's private concerns," Margaret explained.

"I should imagine that *would* be a distinctly bad shock," Dr Edgar said, doubtfully. "Is it not possible to prevent it?"

"No," replied Margaret, shaking her head.

"Or to mitigate it?" suggested Dr Edgar, with a slight tone of coaxing in his voice.

"No," said Margaret pleasantly, but with decision.

"Well," said Dr Edgar, trying hard to keep up a professional manner in spite of his amusement, "Miss Benbow will evidently have to take her chance since you are not disposed to deal mercifully with her great age. You know it

is not very wise to fret the old. The candle goes out sometimes in a curiously unexpected fashion. I cannot pretend that your aunt is a frail old lady. But as I told Miss Sparrow, she really is a little out of sorts to-day."

And he added: "And for the first time since I've been coming here."

The words rose to her lips, 'Why do you come then?' But she checked them; and he went on:

"I should advise you to remember that she is old, and that one has—well, one has to wrap up things for the aged. You must excuse me for speaking to you frankly."

"I asked you to tell me," Margaret said. "I suppose you are right, and that I must remember her age. Ever since I can recall anything, we seem to have been remembering Aunt Caroline's great age."

"So that I am only begging you to continue the well-established habit of years," he urged, in that same coaxing tone of conciliation.

Margaret laughed and capitulated to him.

"You must not think," she said, "that I have wanted to vent any personal anger on your poor suffering patient upstairs. Naturally you don't know me. Let me therefore tell you that I have been a 'woolly lamb' for years—I mean of course in comparison with what I could have been! Because I haven't got Miss Sparrow's nature. And with a different nature, one cannot arrive at the same results, can one?"

"For one's own sake, in a case like this, mercifully not," he answered gravely. "Miss Sparrow's state of subjection has always pained me."

Margaret nodded her head in acquiescence. Evidently he was a man of understanding. She felt encouraged to continue.

"I don't in the least mind if my old aunt abuses me," she said. "I never have minded. I've always rather enjoyed her anger. We've had some splendid fights, she and I! But I shan't be able to stand her abusing my friend, Mrs

Rivers, to whom I am unspeakably indebted. I have, in my life, passed through long and dull years of struggle. Harriet Rivers, my old school friend, has been the only person in the world who stretched out to me the real, helping hand. I'm not of course going to worry you with my history. But she found me in California earning a shoddy sort of livelihood by imposing on people's credulity. I was clairvoyante and crystal-gazer, spiritualist and healer, and all that kind of thing. It paid very well, but I hated myself for it, and yet for the life of me I couldn't have thrown it up to return to the work I'd done before—humdrum teaching. I'd had enough of that for six incarnations. Then Mrs Rivers came, swept away from me everything harmful to my self respect, and landed me in circumstances where I was immediately able to discontinue being a humbug and a sham. I think that it is a tremendous thing for one human being to do for another. Wouldn't you, for instance, take that view if someone had helped you to give up being a humbug and a sham?"

Dr Edgar had been listening to her with the deepest interest; but at her last words he stiffened up and recollected that he was a distinguished surgeon from Upper Brook Street and that Miss Benbow's niece, agreeable though she was, required to be reminded in some way of this important fact. His face lost its human expression and became professionally impersonal. His manner took on the characteristics of his calling, and his voice entered the key of quiet pompousness. Margaret noticed this, and knew that she had blundered.

"I fear," he said, "that I personally am unable to realise the value of your friend's services to you. Still I can understand that your feelings of gratitude would not make it easy for you to hear unkind words spoken against her. I should therefore advise that your interview with Miss Benbow should be as short as possible. And be good enough to remember that I have requested you to consider her great age."

He had risen as he spoke, and he stood for a moment looking absently at Sparrowbird's plane trees.

"Will you oblige me?" he added, turning to Margaret and holding out his hand.

"Yes," she answered, quietly, "I will do as you wish, Dr Edgar."

He passed out of the room and left her staring at her old enemy, the marble clock. He had reached the hall door and put on his hat, when he suddenly paused and looked a little anxiously in the direction of the dining-room. He hesitated, and then took off his hat. He paused again. Finally he made up his mind. He hurried to the dining-room and opened the door. Margaret glanced round and saw his face, human once more, and with the shadow of a repentant smile playing about his mouth.

"You know," he said, "I didn't mean that Miss Benbow could not if absolutely necessary bear a slight shock—a very slight shock. Good-bye. Make it as slight as you can."

The next moment the hall door banged after him; and Margaret received her summons to the presence-chamber.

CHAPTER V

AS Miss Sparrow led Margaret upstairs, she whispered, anxiously :

"Well, dear, and what do you think of our new Doctor? Isn't he noble looking?"

"Yes, Sparrowbird," Margaret answered, "when he does not put on a Harley-Street-Cavendish-Square expression."

"But, my dear," said Miss Sparrow, reproachfully, "he cannot help having the air of a distinguished surgeon."

"No, I suppose he can't, poor man," Margaret said. "And he *is* kind, Sparrowbird."

"Yes, indeed, I know that," Miss Sparrow replied. "He always tries to put things right for me."

"Well, I rather fancy he tried to put something right for me," Margaret said. "I made a sort of blunder. I'll tell you about it another time. And he got rather on his dignity, and hurried away. Then I suppose he thought he had embarrassed me, and he came back again, not on his dignity at all."

"Ah, that is what I should expect of him," Miss Sparrow murmured, with a bright smile of pride on her tired little face.

When they had arrived at Aunt Caroline's boudoir, she whispered in an awe-struck voice, "Hush, my dear." She opened the outer door, paused, knocked at the inner door, and receiving permission to enter, beckoned to Margaret to pass into the room, and effaced herself before Margaret knew what could have happened to her.

Aunt Caroline was seated by the fire, with a thick shawl over her feet, a strong ebony stick by her side, and a King Charles dog in the basket near the fender. She was evidently a tall old woman, and had a severe and commanding face. She

did not wear spectacles, and with the exception of the stick, there was no outward and visible sign that age had demanded and obtained ordinary human dues from her. She held out her hand to Margaret, glanced at her with keen eyes which had always realised things more quickly than any other eyes, and said, with a distinct tone of disapproving criticism :

"You are wearing remarkably handsome clothes."

"I am glad you think so, Aunt Caroline," Margaret answered pleasantly. "I think so too."

Aunt Caroline raised her eyebrows almost imperceptibly, gave her niece another direct stare and added :

"However, I must say they suit you. And you have improved in looks, too."

"Yes, I believe I have," Margaret said meekly. "You see I've had two or three years of very good food. That makes a great deal of difference to one's appearance."

Aunt Caroline raised her eyebrows again. Her harsh features softened a little. No one except herself knew that in a hidden corner of her heart she treasured a real regard for this niece who had always rebelled against her personality, and who had never bent the knee to her money and the possibilities of her favour. Certainly no one could have guessed this secret from the way in which she received her favourite. Margaret herself was only conscious that the old feud between them was being renewed on more or less familiar lines. She sat down on the uncomfortable chair which Miss Benbow reserved especially for her relations, and found herself indulging in her old trick of trying to annoy her aunt by getting her face well out of the light. Aunt Caroline liked to glare comfortably at her victims, but she had never been able to make Margaret adjust herself to an angle suitable for searching scrutiny. She did not, however, complain on this occasion. She turned her own head uneasily two or three times, and began without further preliminaries :

"I am feeling very ill to-day. It is your doing. I have been shocked to hear that you have been living with that questionable Mrs Rivers. When William came last night and

told me that you refused to leave her employment, I had a severe attack of the heart."

"I am exceedingly sorry," Margaret said. "I hope you will soon recover."

"How can I recover when our family honour is being seriously threatened?" Miss Benbow asked sternly. "You evidently do not realise what your stubbornness stands for. But you can at least tell me this. This employer of yours—this Mrs Rivers—is she or is she not a divorced woman?"

"I wonder you don't ask William. He seems to know," Margaret replied.

"That is no answer," Miss Benbow said.

"Perhaps I don't mean to answer, Aunt Caroline," Margaret said, longing already to break her promise to the Doctor.

"And this half-witted man who makes violins," went on Miss Benbow. "Who is he, and what is he doing there? Why should he be there? Perhaps you will feel inclined to answer me that. Violin-making indeed. Why, it is scandalous."

"I don't see why you should consider violin-making a scandalous occupation," Margaret remarked, with a slight smile. "I assure you it is quite harmless. It is so engrossing that there is no time for anything else."

"Who is he?" Miss Benbow demanded of her peremptorily. "You cannot pretend that he does not live there. William saw him."

"Yes, William saw him," Margaret repeated, "and William's face was a study."

"William was shocked," Miss Benbow said.

"He looked it," Margaret replied; "and really I'm not surprised. There is no denying that Paul is a curious and weird person. He would startle anyone—and certainly, William. William has no nerve. I've often wondered how he would behave if his Bank were on fire."

"Who is this Paul," Miss Benbow asked, insistently.

Margaret paused. She did not intend to say a single word

which should elucidate matters to Aunt Caroline, or anyone. But although she had held out creditably so far, she was beginning to feel that the time was approaching when she must either succumb to her aunt's individuality or else administer the slight shock sanctioned by the doctor.

"Who is this Paul?" Miss Benbow repeated, as Margaret still remained silent.

"To use your own words, he is the half-witted man who makes violins," Margaret at last replied.

Miss Benbow glared at her, seemed to reflect for a moment, and then said :

"Your attitude in this matter, Margaret, is extremely painful. William was right in stating that you were bent on going your own way, and that you had no consideration for the family honour. You know that my whole life has been given up to guarding the family honour, for all our sakes, and in memory of my beloved parents, your dear grandfather and grandmother. Any attempt to injure it must necessarily cause me great pain."

"I'm sorry to pain you, Aunt Caroline," Margaret said, "but as for the family honour, William is right as usual. I don't care two straws about it. I never did. I've always thought that you and everyone else would have been far happier if you had not meddled with it. But William is here to uphold it for you. And he is a suitable person for the job. I'm not."

"You do not encourage me to suppose that you are suitable," Miss Benbow said, a sudden and dangerous flush coming over her face.

"I'm glad I don't," Margaret returned.

"I never believed that I should live to see the day when a niece of mine deliberately preferred to remain on as companion to an immoral woman instead of accepting a safe position in a household of good repute," Miss Benbow remarked.

Margaret rose from her chair. The colour had mounted to her cheeks now.

"Our household is of good repute," she said, haughtily. "And Mrs Rivers is not an immoral woman. No one shall call her that in my presence."

"Then, pray, what do you call an immoral woman?" Miss Benbow asked, with biting contempt.

"An immoral woman is a woman who is eager and hungry to take away the character of another woman," Margaret answered.

Aunt Caroline waved her hand in impatient dismissal of her niece's words. She had ever retained the masterly habit of either dismissing or ignoring any statements with which she felt herself unable to deal at the moment. Whilst her adversaries remained in a feverish state of irritation over the want of respect due to their excited emotions, she herself, nimbly and with consummate serenity, had arrived at the next step in the progression of her thoughts.

"Four hundred a year is a very large salary," she now said. "As William rightly observes, only a person who had something to conceal, would dream of spending such an extravagant sum on the wages of a mere companion. I agree with him that this alone points to the fact that your Mrs Rivers has an unsatisfactory past which she pays you to safe-guard."

Margaret flushed again, but she did not trouble to be angry this time, having re-learned the old lesson that Aunt Caroline paid no heed to other people's indignation. She stood buttoning her glove, and glancing at the Foundling Hospital which could be seen through the trees of the Square.

"I should like to point out before I go, Aunt Caroline," she said, quietly, "that there is another aspect of Mrs Rivers's liberality to me; for of course I know that it is liberality, princely liberality. This is the other aspect. Mrs Rivers found me earning a precarious sort of livelihood in a mean sort of way. William the Perfect has no doubt told you the tale. Well, she took pity on my condition and wanted to lift me out of it. She saw I needed happiness,

and freedom from drudgery. She gave me both. She held the delightful doctrine that it was time I began to enjoy myself and to have plenty of money. Of course I value the high salary tremendously. I assure you I shouldn't like Miss Sparrow's salary, nor her life, poor thing. Good Heavens, no! But still more than the high salary, I value, and shall always value, the way in which my friend helped me. She saw I was drifting. She held out her kind hands instantly and hauled me into the harbour. But if I explained, you would not understand. You don't know much about real life, Aunt Caroline; and you have no horizon. It would be lost labour to speak to you, and I don't feel up to making any useless efforts. So I'll be off and relieve you of my presence. But there is one thing I must say. I have been settled in London for some time. I have purposely kept away from my relations who never interested me and never cared for me. I now only ask to be left alone. I intend to continue to go my own way. I must request you not to attempt to interfere with my concerns. You have no part in them."

"Is that all you have to say?" Miss Benbow asked, in a singularly subdued voice.

"Yes, Aunt Caroline," Margaret answered, looking steadily at the hard old face with its steely eyes.

"Then perhaps you will be good enough to send Miss Sparrow to me," Miss Benbow said. "Good-bye."

She held out her left hand to Margaret. She smiled a little grim smile.

"We have had an agreeable interview, haven't we?" she added. "All the same, I've been pleased to see you again. And that dress suits you. So I've no horizon. And it's lost labour to speak to me. Well, good-bye. Send Miss Sparrow up at once. Tell her to bring a dose of my new medicine. I shall need it."

Margaret had reached the door and nearly effected an escape when Aunt Caroline turned round in her chair and said:

"That half-witted man who makes violins—has he any horizon, I wonder?"

"Yes," answered Margaret. "I am thankful to say he has."

"Ah," said Aunt Caroline slyly, "easier to live with, in consequence, I suppose? Yes?"

But Margaret had gone. She found Miss Sparrow waiting anxiously in the dining-room and despatched her upstairs, whilst she herself settled down in the armchair and defied Aunt Caroline by what the Christian scientists call 'the absent treatment.' She did not flatter herself that she had come off with flying colours in this encounter; but at least she had not fallen into any ambush prepared by the clever old tyrant, and she had not uttered a single word which even indirectly could be said to corroborate the report concerning Harriet's past life. That was something; and for the rest, no one could hope to be a match for Aunt Caroline.

Margaret could not help admiring her ready brain, her quick resource, and her masterly self-control. It was true that this self-control was born of contemptuous indifference to other people's value; still it was an armour of great strength, and, as such, an enviable possession. Margaret decided, to her own astonishment, that she was pleased as an old war horse to see Aunt Caroline again, and that she would not object to a second interview, when she would try her hand at routing the enemy more effectually. She smiled at her folly in supposing that she had any power to administer a shock to Aunt Caroline. Aunt Caroline was bomb-proof. No, she must find some other and more subtle way of dealing with this invulnerable old lady with whom she had carried on a long feud. Her thoughts went back to the early days of her young girlhood when Aunt Caroline had given her a match and she had refused to accept it. She recalled her very words: "*I don't want anything from you. I hate you.*" That had been her open declaration of war. But she remembered also that, even then, she had been obliged to admire Aunt Caroline's wonderful self-control. She put the watch

aside without a single word of reproof or comment, and went quietly out of the room, leaving Margaret in the wrong. She had always had the knack of making people feel in the wrong. Margaret foresaw that this would be her own fate in a few minutes.

And so it was. Sparrowbird arrived looking terribly distressed, and, in an agitated tone of voice, said :

"My dear, my dear, what can you have been saying to poor Miss Benbow? She has asked for her will. She never asks for it unless she feels very ill herself, or thinks the dog is dying. What can you have been saying to her?"

"I told her she must not interfere with my concerns, Sparrowbird," Margaret answered, half amused and half anxious. "That's all. Is she very cross? I do hope she has not been angry with you."

"She's not angry," Miss Sparrow said. "I wish she were. I shouldn't be uneasy. She hasn't referred to anything that may have passed between you, but keeps on repeating: '*So I've no horizon. And it's lost labour to speak to me; for I've no horizon. Miss Sparrow, have you observed that I have no horizon?*' And she would not take the medicine. She said if she had no horizon, no amount of medicine could give it to her. What can she mean? What can you have been saying to her, dear? I am shocked at you."

Margaret first of all had a good laugh, and then was shocked at herself.

CHAPTER VI

EDWARD BENDING, after leaving Tromsö, had returned to England where the usual honours reserved for brilliant and dashing explorers awaited him. He was lionised, and stood the ordeal without losing all his common-sense. He knew well the dire dangers to which he was exposed, but said to himself repeatedly :

"If a fellow has a sister-in-law like Ermyntrude to depreciate him unflinchingly, he doesn't run much chance of getting the big head."

He lectured before the Royal Geographical, and by invitation he visited Edinburgh and Manchester, and finally hurried off to fulfil his engagements in America. After a successful tour there he had returned home and established himself in Queen Anne's Mansions. His first visit was to his sister-in-law, Mrs Ermyntrude Bending and her daughter Bess, his little niece to whom he had ever been devoted. His second visit was to Harriet Rivers.

Since meeting her at Tromsö he had thought of her unceasingly. Often whilst in America, in spite of the fuss and flattery lavished on him, he felt terribly tempted to throw up everything and rush back to see her. Her beautiful face haunted him. Her laughter echoed in his ears. He was always recalling her gay spirit and the large scale on which her temperament was built. For it appealed especially to his nature that she was free from pettiness. He who had for so many years been accustomed to the big spaces of the earth and had faced great dangers and privations of many kinds, found it difficult to cope with paltry smallnesses in man or woman. But here was a woman, beautiful in herself, large-natured and with a dash of hardihood in her which to an

explorer seemed to imply possibilities of easy companionship. Who was she? Where did she come from? Who were her people? These were questions which at first did not present themselves to his mind. It was sufficient to him that he had found her, that she had been waiting to welcome him. She was her own explanation, and independent of any setting.

He had this borne in on him as he entered the drawing-room in Old Queen Street. When she rose to greet him, she gave him the impression of coming out of space and *happening* to be in this particular region. It crossed his mind that he would have had the same impression of her if he had met her on a distant mountain, or found her on the great ice-fields of his beloved North. This thought, fleeting though it was and vaguely outlined, added to his belief that she had always been part of his life, and that those days at Tromsø were but a confirmation of the years which were past.

"An early visit," he said. "There's Big Ben just striking eleven. That's the hour you generally arrived at the *Canute*. I thought I'd keep the same rule for your vessel!"

"Quite right, an excellent rule," Harriet said, laughing and pointing to the armchair. "I had the easy-chair in the saloon of the *Canute*. You must have it in my vessel!"

He settled down in the armchair, lit the cigar which she had offered him, and basked in her presence. It did not seem necessary to talk at first. She did not seem to expect it. She took up her pomegranate embroidery with its design from an old fresco in Chichester Cathedral, and continued working as though she were alone. There was no pose in this, for Harriet was incapable of posing. As he glanced at her from time to time, he could not help comparing her with Ermyntrode, who was considered by all his relations and family-friends to be a most special possession graciously bestowed by Providence on the Bending tribe. He himself had been trained by circumstance to look up to her; but

there were moments when he faced the bare fact that habit and family tradition influenced him in this respect and not Ermyntude. But that was heresy. Loyalty demanded from him that he should stifle it. Tradition exacted from him that he should continue to believe Ermyntude to be a supernaturally wonderful person. So he rebuked valiantly the lurking suspicion that his sister-in-law posed, and gave himself up joyously to the pleasure of easy intercourse with someone who dared to be herself.

"You cannot imagine how glad I am to get back from America," he said at length. "If my locker hadn't wanted refilling, I should have bolted, and let all my engagements take care of themselves. I don't mean that I had not great kindness, you know. But they make you believe that you are too much of a big fellow. You like it at first, of course, for you're only human. But you soon get tired of it. I assure you I felt overjoyed to see my sister-in-law, who has always had a very poor opinion of me. I said to myself: 'Good. Now you know where you are, old chap. You're not a hero, but only a rather unsatisfactory brother-in-law.' I hear that some Bishop or Archbishop is going to make a tour in America. I hope he has a sister-in-law to restore him to his rightful place in the universe when he returns home!"

Harriet looked up brightly from her work.

"Then you are quite restored?" she asked.

"Quite," he answered. "I'm entirely sane again, and feel as fit as a fiddle."

"But you like your honours, I hope," she said. "You ought to like them. You worked for them and won them. No one can take that from you."

"Oh yes, I like them tremendously," he exclaimed, boyishly. "In fact, I'm a very happy man."

"Tell me about your experiences in America," she said, plying her needle again. "I've been there, you know, and shall be doubly interested in consequence."

Then he dashed into an account of his lecturing tour. and

poured forth his opinions on the country and its people, Harriet agreeing with him sometimes, and at other times contradicting him in lively fashion. Margaret looked in upon them, and found them in this easy companionship, a continuation of the camaraderie begun in Tromsø and not injured by his accumulated laurel wreaths.

"We were all right, including the whale lady," she thought. "The same boyishness, not ruined yet by the English or the American public. Good for us all!"

She stopped long enough to make him feel that she was not running away because of his presence, and then disappeared for her morning walk along the Embankment and her daily duty of taking a dinner of sprats for the seagulls on Westminster Bridge. She finished up as usual with a stroll in St James's Park to see whether the chestnut buds had made any progress, or the hidden bulbs were rising from their beds. When she returned in about an hour's time, Bending was still in the armchair smoking contentedly, and Harriet was still embroidering.

"I'm still here," he said, simply. "Had to come to anchor after all my wanderings. By Jove! What a nice situation you have here."

"Yes, isn't it splendid?" Harriet said. "We both love it dearly. I thank Margaret every day of my life. She insisted on coming here."

"We love every inch of it," Margaret said, proudly; "the Park in front, our old-world street itself, our public house 'The Two Chairmen,' and our Cockpit steps, and the grubby little children from the back lanes. Well, I'll go and see about the lunch. You're going to stop, aren't you?"

"Yes, he is staying," Harriet answered for him. "Will you tell Quong?"

"Ship's biscuits, ship's biscuits," Bending interposed in his cheery way. "Don't forget I'm a hardened explorer."

"Yes, and according to Fru Kjaever, accustomed to all the luxuries of an Arctic expedition," laughed Margaret. "No, I think I must certainly go and interview Quong."

"Nonsense," he insisted. "Sit there and tell me what became of the interpreter. You tamed that grim man. He became as mild as the Madagascar missionary. You used some subtle influence over him."

"He admired her gift of languages," Harriet said, proudly. "That was the secret."

"The secret was her music," Margaret contradicted. "Do you remember how he used to come and listen to her in the little drawing-room, sitting sulkily in a corner by himself, whilst we crowded round the piano?"

"Ah," sang out Bending, "I hope we're going to have music as well as ship's biscuits."

"As much as you like," Harriet answered. "I don't need coercion, do I?"

"A Steinway, too," he said, nodding approvingly at the piano. "Good. The best-built craft for accompanying my concertina!"

"But where is that august instrument?" Margaret asked, "I don't see it. Haven't you brought it?"

"Not on a first visit," he answered. "The concertina has to be courted, encouraged. She's shy ashore. She's only self-possessed at sea. She'll come by invitation only. Talking about the interpreter, do you remember how disgusted he was with my performances!"

"Yes," laughed Harriet. "Do you remember how he was always murmuring: '*Herr Gott, what an instrument, and what songs!*'!"

"My poor interpreter," Margaret put in. "I own he wasn't a gay companion. But when he condescended to talk, I assure you he was deeply interesting."

"For a man knowing twenty-six languages and a few score dialects, he was remarkably silent," Bending said. "But as I observed before, you had the key to him. We hadn't. You tamed him, Miss Tressider, you tuned him."

"Ah, that reminds me," interrupted Harriet. "The piano is a little out of tune in the treble. Margaret, you might tell Quong to go upstairs and ask——"

"Yes," said Margaret, abruptly. "I'll see to it."

"Good heavens," she thought, as she hastened from the room. "What a hopeless duffer she is! She was going to ask Paul to come down and tune the piano."

It exasperated her that Harriet realised so little the complications attendant on Paul's presence in the house. She rang for Quong, hoping to learn that Paul had gone out, or gone to bed; for there was one comfort about him, whatever he did, he did for a long time. She was relieved to hear from the Chinaman that he had gone to bed about an hour ago. Now this meant that he was safe for fifteen or sixteen hours, and that Bending's first visit would probably pass off without any contretemps. For the rest, she had decided in her own mind to claim Paul boldly as her relative, and thus to account for him if the occasion should arise. It was useless to expect that Harriet would look after her own interests, and therefore necessary that Margaret should take thought, even surreptitiously, for the friend whom she greatly wished to see happy.

Nothing marred Bending's first visit to Old Queen Street. Harriet was in a state of quiet but ecstatic delight. Margaret gave secret thanks that Paul's power of sleeping had not upset her calculations, and the Captain went away with smiling face and buoyant heart.

On his second visit, luck had it that Paul had gone into the country, to the workshops of Messrs Graham & Sons, the noted old firm of violin-makers. But on the third occasion when the Captain came, Paul was in his work-room, mooning over some delicate repairs to be done to a worm-eaten Ruggeri back. Margaret who was surveying the coast, found that he was inclined to be restless. She knew a cure which was sometimes effectual. She took her mendings up there, established herself near the fire, and made an omelette *aux fines herbes* for his lunch, which she shared with him. In addition she ate audaciously of bananas, dates and olives, washed down by large chunks of cheese and cucumber. Paul was hugely proud and gratified.

"That's the only kind of meal to eat, Margaret," he said. "Much better lunch with me every day. And now we can settle down to work again for hours, can't we?"

This third visit, which also passed off safely, was followed by the disturbing encounter with Brother William, the discussion about Paul, and Harriet's set determination to let things take their chance, even though she ran the risk of losing Edward Bending. So when he wrote to say that he hoped to call in on a certain Thursday morning, Margaret, by Harriet's express wish, made no attempt to mount guard over the 'old sign-post.' But once more fate was kind. The two men only met on the doorstep. Bending glanced at the seedy appearance of the fiddle-maker, and took him to be a rate-collector.

"That rate-collector has a mysteriously radiant smile," he thought. "I didn't realise before that rate-collecting was an inspiring occupation."

Little did he know that the smile was born, not of rates, but of fiddle-varnish. Paul had suddenly thought of a new resin to improve the oil-varnish which had been occupying his attention for many months, day and night. But although Bending mistook its origin, he did not forget the smile. Later on he recognised the man by the remembrance of that radiance.

He was radiant himself. Things were going exceedingly well for him, and the renewal of his intercourse with Harriet Rivers was leading him in the direction of the haven of his heart's longing. Ermyntrude had been away, but she was now back from Bournemouth, and he would ask her to call on Mrs Rivers. She would, of course, grant his request. She had always been kind, though terribly superior. In his old wild days she had benevolently pitied the Bending family for having such a scapegrace member as himself; but her disapproval of him, which he knew he deserved well, had ever been tempered by a dutiful patience, exasperating at times, but not unbearable. She had looked down from the soaring heights on which, by her own insistence, life had placed her, and stretched out to him a gracious hand.

Family tradition had taught him to take that hand gratefully. Yes, Ermyntrude would call at once, but he wished that he could feel more sanguine about the success of the meeting between these two women, who were entirely different from each other in thoughts and habits. Ermyntrude would never understand Mrs Rivers's impulsive nature. Mrs Rivers would never fathom Ermyntrude's 'culture.' No one could. But there was Mrs Rivers's beautiful playing to help matters ; for Ermyntrude was passionately fond of music. And, of course, there was Bess, his niece.

He staked his hopes on her. If he could contrive that she accompanied her mother, all would be well. Instinct told him that she, his close friend and ally, would be drawn both to Mrs Rivers and Miss Tressider. She, even as he, would feel at her ease with them in their cheery atmosphere, and be secretly thankful to creep down from soaring heights. He had a vague suspicion that Miss Bess had been doing some creeping down on her own account during his three years' absence. He laughed a little, and then checked his mirth and administered a reproof to himself. But he was still smiling when, after a stroll along Bird Cage Walk, he arrived in his pleasant rooms in Queen Anne's Mansions.

He settled down, intending to answer some of his neglected letters and sort his *Canute* journal notes, before setting out for Ermyntrude's house in Melbury Road, Kensington. He took off his coat and his collar, turned up his sleeves and lit his Dutch pipe. Writing was not much in his line, but he resolved to make a big effort to finish his 'Voyage of the *Canute*.' That book represented hundreds of pounds. He was old-fashioned enough to consider that he ought to have plenty of money in his locker before his pride was justified in thinking of marriage. So he made some fresh extracts from his journal, worked up the chapter called "Sledge and Kayak," and was glancing through his photographs, hesitating which to choose as illustrations of the text, when a knock came at the door, and the servant brought a card which Bending greeted with a growl. But the name

'Miss Elizabeth Bending,' changed the growl into an exclamation of pleasure.

"Show her up at once," he said, slipping on his coat, and making a dash for his collar. And in a few minutes Bess appeared, a young and radiant presence, sure of the welcome which awaited her.

"How jolly to be here, Uncle Ted!" she said, joyously. "And Hughie is following as soon as he can get away from Clement's Inn. I'm going to spend the whole afternoon with you, even if you haven't the time. Don't say you haven't the time! Not that it makes any difference! I'm here to stay."

"Of course I have the time," he laughed, pushing all his papers away from him. "Always time for my niece-pal. We'll have some tea at once. Press the bell. Under the pipe rack, my dear. Steady though. Don't kick the concertina very much, if you don't mind!"

"The dear old concertina!" she cried. "I long to hear it again. You must give us a song this afternoon. I promised Hughie that you should sing us 'Black-eyed Sue' or 'In the Gloaming.' I wanted him to hear how sentimental you could be! He was rather shocked at first. Hughie is very conventional, you know. He looks upon you as the great explorer. And I only think of you as my old sea-robber of an uncle. I say, what a pile of papers! I suppose you've been working hard at 'The Voyage of the *Canute*' all day?"

"Well, not exactly," he answered, a little sheepishly. "But quite long enough, for my taste. Writing isn't in my line, Bess. It comes deuced hard."

"Of course it does," she answered. "I can't imagine you writing a book, Uncle Ted. But never fear. You'll manage it all right. Every one will think it splendid, no matter what rubbish you invent! I'm sure I shall. And those are the photographs for it? Oh, you must have this one of the walruses. Dear things, how nice and ugly they are! And Uncle Ted, this one of you playing the concertina in the saloon. That's ripping! You do look an old dear there,

like an Esquimaux mummy. Do you know we've been hearing such lovely stories of you, about the way you managed the men, and their devotion to you—and all that. The botanist told Hughie's chief. He said—oh well, I'm not going to tell you what he said—except that you were one of the few explorers who wished your honours to be shared by your men too. But we all knew that. Mother said that you were incapable of selfishness."

"By Jove, did she say that?" Bending asked eagerly.

"Yes," replied Bess, smiling at his boyish eagerness. "You know, dear mother does really appreciate you, though she—though she—well, you understand, don't you? But, let me tell you, she was delighted with that leader in the *Times* about you. She showed it to me herself. She had learnt one sentence by heart. I've got it pat too. Listen. '*He stands in the very first rank of that brilliant company of eager spirits who are always scheming to plant the first human footsteps somewhere beyond 'the flaming barriers of the world.'*' Jolly, isn't it? Oh dear, I'm so proud of you. And mother is too, though—though—well, you are both so different, aren't you?"

"Look here, Bess," the Captain said, excitedly. "It is a bit of real luck for me if I am in your mother's good books. For I want her to do something for me, and I want you to help me out."

"Why, of course, I will," she exclaimed; "but what on earth can I do for you, specially now you've become such a swell, Uncle Ted. I should love to serve you. But how?"

"Swell or not you can serve me tremendously," he replied, suddenly blushing and looking a little embarrassed. "The fact is, Bess, I've—well, you'll sympathise with me as you're in love with your Hughie—the fact is I've fallen in love myself, and I made up my mind to tell you."

"You dear old thing!" she cried, impulsively. "And can't I see her? Where is she? Don't say she's far away in the Polar regions, on an ice-floe?"

"No, she is here, in London," he answered. "Quite near here, in Old Queen Street. Now listen. I want your mother to call on her. But I want you to be sure and go too, at the same time as your mother. That is most important, Bess; because you will understand her, and her friend, Miss Tressider, too. I am certain of that. But Ermytrude won't understand either of them. A different type. You see, your mother is very cultured, isn't she?"

Bess nodded her head silently, and sighed gently. Uncle Ted also sighed.

"And all people are not able to—to be so cultured," he went on hesitatingly, overawed at once by the traditional demands made on behalf of Ermytrude's wonderfulness. Bess again nodded her head silently. She believed she had succeeded so far in giving no signs to the outer world. But she was becoming intolerably tired of her mother's culture.

"Your mother's realm is a drawing-room, a salon; and justly so," Bending continued, gravely. "I don't mean to say that the lady with whom I've fallen in love would not grace any drawing-room. But her realm is the world—anywhere. It wouldn't matter where she was. She would be splendid to cross a desert with, or to climb a mountain with. Grand on an ice floe. She'd be fine in a shipwreck. I would stake the reputation of the *Canute* on that statement."

"But, Uncle Ted, that's glorious!" the girl exclaimed, enthusiastically. "The very woman for you. And is she beautiful? I do hope she's beautiful."

"Yes, she is very beautiful," he said, smiling brightly at the recollection of Harriet's face.

"Is she fair or dark?" Bess examined.

"She is neither the one nor the other," he answered. "She has taken what she liked of both. And she has a lot of beautiful brown hair, and shining eyes, far apart from each other. And——"

"Yes, yes," Bess said, sympathetically. "Go on, Uncle Ted! I'm dying to hear more."

"And she is tall and strong," he continued, delightedly. "She looks like a queen, rather a warlike queen. You could imagine her riding forth at the head of her warriors. And she has a wonderful voice, Bess. I never heard such a voice. And shining eyes. I see them now. Shining eyes, I tell you."

Bess got up from her chair, and with one joyous bound in the direction of her uncle, imprinted a special kiss of her own on the back of his neck.

"You dear old sea robber," she said. "You're awfully in love with her, aren't you? I'm sure I shall love her. Of course I'll go with mother. And, Uncle Ted, don't worry about mother. She will be very kind."

"I am sure your mother will be very kind," he answered. "But they are so different, Bess. You see, you can't possibly imagine your mother in a shipwreck, can you? It isn't her line."

"No, it isn't her line," Bess admitted in that awed tone of voice which every Bending invariably adopted when speaking of or even referring to Ermytrude.

"But," she added, a little less gravely, "we must hope for the best."

And at that moment Hughie Jerome arrived, and was at once told the great news. The young fellow had an ardent hero-worship for Uncle Ted, and was so delighted at being admitted into his confidence, that all he could do at first was to wring Bending's hand continuously, and to murmur:

"By Jove, Uncle Ted, by Jove!"

But when he had recovered himself a little, and had become more accustomed to his unexpected honours, he asked impulsively:

"I say, can't we all three go and see her now? It's only a stone's throw. Wouldn't it be ripping?"

Bending blushed and said:

"Well, my dear fellow, to tell you the truth, I've only just come back from her!"

"Why, you said you'd been working at the 'Voyage of the *Canute*' all day," Bess put in reproachfully.

"No, Bess, you said I'd been working all day," Bending answered. "I merely did not contradict you."

They chaffed him well for his deceitfulness, and teased him too for having established himself so near to old Queen Street, which, as Hughie said, was only a stone's throw from Queen Anne's Mansions.

"It seems absurd not to rush over there at once," Bess exclaimed. "But we couldn't go before mother had called."

"No, of course not," Hughie said, passing instantly from lightheartedness into suitable solemnity. "But I hope she will call at once."

"Oh yes," Bess replied. "I am sure mother will call at once. She is always very busy with her lectures and committee meetings, but she'll make the time."

"Bess will go with her," Bending said, gravely. "We've arranged that."

"Ah, a good arrangement," Hughie said, equally gravely. "You see, Mrs Bending is—well, I oughtn't to say anything—she's always awfully kind to me—isn't she, Bess? But she is a little—a little ceremonious."

Bess remained impassive, but the Captain nodded assent. He was becoming more and more nervous at the prospect of this necessary meeting between Ermytrude and Harriet. He would have liked to hurry off to Ermytrude at once and make his request, but he had not the heart to spoil the afternoon for the young people who were exceedingly happy and eager to be with him, and humorously triumphant at having secured him for themselves.

So he gave himself up to them and opened all the stores of his experiences and adventures for their private benefit. They routed amongst his papers, sorted his photographs, and settled on his illustrations in most tyrannical fashion. He did not need to be patient with them, for he was as contented as they themselves. When he paused to draw breath, or refill his pipe, they said: "Go on, Uncle Ted, fire away."

We've not heard half enough." And he smiled and dashed obediently into another thrilling story; and to their great delight finished up with one of his most sentimental songs on the concertina. Bess laughed and applauded until the tears ran down her bonny cheeks. But at last it was time for them to hurry away and dine with some friends in Chelsea. He saw them off at St James's Park Station. Bess whispered privately:

"I'm simply longing to see her, Uncle Ted. And don't be worried about mother. I'll stand by you. Listen, I'll tell you a secret. I have a plan. I'll try to prevent her from reading any fearfully learned books for the next few days. Then she won't be so—well, you know what I mean."

They waved their young hands, and he stood on the platform until the train disappeared. Bess's protective words echoed pleasantly in his ears, and brought a tender little smile to his face.

"Begad," he thought. "If only Ermyltrude were as easy to get on with. But, of course, she is a wonderful woman. Sebert always thought so to the end. But wonderful people can be deuced difficult. Well, I must go and tackle her. I wasn't far wrong about my little Bess. She's creeping down from those mountain peaks."

He did not break in upon Ermyltrude at dinner-time. He dined at his club, the Royal Societies, and having carefully computed that he had given her sufficient time to settle down for the evening, he presented himself at 12 Melbury Road and was shown into the drawing-room.

She was seated on the sofa absorbed in a new volume of Philosophical Studies; but she rose to greet him, welcoming him in her usual stately manner which seldom failed to make her visitors feel that they were being received by royalty in disguise. She was a woman of middle height and elegant figure, not beautiful and yet extremely handsome, not really intellectual in aspect, and yet sufficiently pensive-featured to have won the reputation of being a rare and deep thinker. She gave a distinct impression of being lifted above the

ordinary commonplace details of everyday life ; and most of her friends would have experienced a painful shock if she had been forced by Fate to descend from her heights. She was, in fact, regarded as something very special, probably because she herself had ever believed herself, silently, but none the less convincingly, to be of a separate and exceptional classification. Her unspoken claim was allowed. No one had ever dreamed of challenging her goodness, her wisdom, her culture, her criticism, her sympathy, her methods. The *câchet* of her approval was invariably coveted on all momentous occasions. Bending wanted that *câchet* now, and he was haunted by an uneasy presentiment that he would not be able to secure it. Ermyntrude would certainly be agreeable to Mrs Rivers, but she would not approve of her.

As he sat there talking on every subject except the one most important to him, he questioned himself whether it were worth while attempting to bring the two women together. And yet he knew that, following the example of everyone else, he would be gratified by his sister-in-law's encouragement. A ridiculous fact, no doubt, but a fact. Yes, he decided that the risk was worth while. Moreover Ermyntrude was not in one of her remote moods that evening. She was encompassed by a gentle benevolence which wafted her nearer to the earth, and which was the outward indication of the pleasure caused her by the flattering reports of Bending's achievements and generous character.

She leaned to the belief that she had hitherto undervalued him. She could not blame herself seriously for this mistake. Edward had always been the scapegrace of the Bending family. When she married Sebert, he was in great trouble over his younger brother's delinquencies. It was true that the wild young sailor had righted himself to a certain extent as the years went on. But there had been much to bear, much to forgive and forget. She had ever owned that he was brave and generous-hearted. But his character and temperament made no appeal to her sympathies. And she had given him no credit for brain-power. The *Times* told her she was wrong.

The leading Scientific Societies in the world told her she was wrong. She bowed her head. She rejoiced to have this opportunity of offering him her appreciative reparation.

"You have indeed brought honour to us all, Edward," she said. "We are proud of you. Dear Sebert would have rejoiced. And your father and mother."

"Ah," he answered gravely. "I thought of them many a time in that far-off North. I led them a rare dance in the old days. And yet I loved them."

Ermyntrude made no comment on his words. She granted a moment's silent homage to his regretful memories and then went on :

"I have been reading that notice of you in the *Times*. It was eminently gratifying. We stay-at-home people, Edward, do not always realise the full value of the work done by intrepid travellers and explorers. We do not always rightly estimate their characters and their fundamental excellences. Our narrower lives limit our understanding. But some of us learn. I have learnt."

She smiled ever so slightly, as a great personage might smile, condescending for once to own to some trivial shortcoming. Bending, encouraged by these evidences of her graciousness, plunged headlong into his request.

"Ermyntrude," he began, "I want you to be good enough to do something for me, something which will really make me very happy."

"Why, surely," she answered kindly. "What can it be?"

"Well, the fact is," he said shyly, "I've—I've fallen in love at last, Ermyntrude. I want you and Bess to call on the—to call on her."

"But of course," consented Ermyntrude. "It is the least we could do for you."

"Thank you," he said warmly. "A man likes his women-representatives to turn up, doesn't he?"

"Yes, naturally," she replied. "What is her name? Where does she live?"

"Her name is Harriet Rivers," said Bending, beginning

to feel more at his ease. "She is a delightful woman, Ermyntrude. I do hope you will like her. She lives in London. She has a house in Westminster, in Old Queen Street. I did not meet her first in London, but in Tromsö, oddly enough. She was the first English person I set eyes on when I landed. Wasn't that curious?"

"Very curious," Ermyntrude agreed. "And you learnt to know her there?"

"Yes," he said eagerly. "She and her friend, Miss Tressider, were in the same little hotel as myself. We saw a good deal of each other. In those outposts of the world, you know, friendships ripen quickly. After I had gone away, I could not forget her. Her face was always before me. When I returned from America, I immediately sought her out in London; and I knew that I had made no mistake and that she was the one woman in the world for me."

"Are you engaged to her?" Ermyntrude asked meditatively.

"No, I have not got as far as that yet," he said, his shyness beginning to come on again. "I know and feel that she likes me exceedingly—but she may not care as much as all that. Also I wished to finish my book about the expedition, and haul in the money from the publishers."

There was a pause, and then Ermyntrude asked pleasantly:

"Is Miss Rivers quite young?"

"No, I should think she would be about thirty-eight," he answered. "And she is Mrs Rivers."

"A widow then?" Ermyntrude suggested.

"Well, naturally," he answered with a half smile. "I should tell you she is a splendid pianist. Her music will delight you."

"Indeed," Ermyntrude said. "That is pleasant news. And who are her people, Edward?"

"Her people?" repeated Bending a little uneasily. "Her people? Oh, she hasn't any. They are dead. She lives with her friend and companion, Miss Tressider."

There was another pause. The Captain became nervous, and was relieved when Ermyntrude said :

"Well, Edward, you must give me her address. I will write a note to her at once, and see whether she can arrange to receive me to-morrow."

"Thank you," he exclaimed. "I knew you would wish to help me. And by the way, Ermyntrude, I should so much like Bess to go with you. It would be a great pleasure to me if she accompanied you."

"Pardon me, but I think I must make the first visit alone," Ermyntrude said, with a slight return to her royal manner.

But seeing the disappointment on his face, she softened and added :

"I am sure that I shall be taking Bess to see your friend almost immediately."

Bending knew by experience that he had to be content with this concession. It was characteristic of Ermyntrude that she made no comments on his answers to her questions concerning Mrs Rivers. and yet had given him clearly to understand that, in the absence of detailed information about this stranger, she must at least take precautions for the sake of her young daughter, and pay the first visit unaccompanied by Bess. It was further characteristic of her to have tempered her decision by intimating indirectly that personally she believed those precautions to be unnecessary.

In spite of his disappointment, Bending could not but own to himself that she was admirable. She at once addressed an envelope to Mrs Rivers and wrote a charmingly gracious little note, asking to be allowed the pleasure of calling on her the next afternoon. Bending thought it read delightfully. He was proud of it, and proud of the marked superiority of the handwriting. He had not gained his point, but he was almost persuaded that Ermyntrude was right, and that he had been wrong.

He walked home to Queen Anne's Mansions. It was a crisp starry night, and he was thankful to stretch his legs and

cool himself in the fresh air. The temperature of Ermyntrude's house always exhausted him; and her temperament, even at its best, took the wind out of his sails.

No, he had not gained his point, and not secured the much needed co-operation of Bess. But he comforted himself by reflecting that since he was in Ermyntrude's good books for the moment, the interview would probably pass off more successfully than he anticipated. When he came to Birdcage Walk, he stopped suddenly, arrested by a disturbing thought.

"I rather wish I could have said I knew her people," he remarked aloud. "Who were her people?"

But a radiant vision of Harriet broke instantly upon his mind's eye. He remembered that she was independent of atmosphere, independent of setting—her own setting.

But Ermyntrude thought differently. After her brother-in-law had gone, she leaned back amongst her cushions and gave this matter, which was a family matter, some long period of real study. Finally she took a note-book from the silk bag lying by her side and wrote in it: (1) *Her mother and her mother's family.* (2) *Her father and her father's family.* (3) *Her late husband's name and his family.*

She shut the book, but after a moment's reflection, she opened it once more and added: (4) *Date of husband's death.* She made a note of this new engagement on her list of the morrow's social duties. She saw that it would be necessary to sacrifice a lecture on Plato, in order to carry out her promise to Edward. She was extremely glad to do this, partly because she had ever shown herself willing to minister to the interests of the whole Bending community, and partly because her temperament demanded of her that her actions should be able to pay court to her temperament. She then dismissed the matter from her mind; for obviously nothing more was required of her intelligence and watchfulness until she should have become acquainted with Mrs Rivers. One of her secret instincts, secret almost from herself, was never to waste herself. So she returned to the book of Philosophical Studies which she had been studying when Edward arrived,

and which was dedicated to her in terms eloquent of the writer's admiration of her intellect and appreciation of her generous encouragement. She struggled gallantly with a task which was in truth beyond her mental range, until Nature taking pity on her, worked a secret kindness for her, in the softly-lighted room, in the luxurious and beautiful surroundings of Melbury Road.

Ermyntrude slept.

CHAPTER VII

DR HENRY EDGAR sat in his consulting room in Upper Brook Street, leaned back listlessly in his armchair and gave way to an attack of depression which would have astonished his patients to whom he was always recommending the wholesome habit of cheerfulness. He had passed a sleepless night. He had been reviewing his life, with its ambitions, its ideals, its strivings, its struggles, its hard work and its remarkable successes. Success and an acknowledged position had fallen to his share earlier than to most distinguished surgeons, but had exacted their inevitable penalty from him, robbing him of the fresh-heartedness of young manhood and the fine legacy which that fresh-heartedness passes on to the early forties.

He was forty-one, and looked ten years older. He was slightly bald. His square face intended by nature to be well filled out, had fallen in rather markedly, and showed traces of nervous tension kept with difficulty under control. His eyes were clear and strong. They had that splendid attribute of sudden access of brightness indicative of quick mental perception.

He was out of conceit with life, and at war with himself. Margaret Tressider's words haunted him in the night. They haunted him now: "*And then Mrs Rivers came and swept all that away from me and landed me in circumstances where I could discontinue being a humbug and a sham. I think that is a tremendous thing for one human being to do for another. Wouldn't you, for instance, take that view, if someone had helped you to give up being a sham and a humbug?*"

For the moment he had thought it an impertinence that she had put the question to him; but he regretted that he

had been paltry enough to resent it. She had frankly said that she had been imposing on people's credulity and earning her livelihood by quackery. Either consciously or unconsciously she had included him in the same category. Probably unconsciously. Duffer that he was, he had been vexed with her, then vexed with himself. Then he had laughed. And the more he thought of Margaret, the more he wished to see her again. After all, even if she had meant to cast a stone at him in his professional capacity, was she so far wrong? He knew that he had helped people, had done faithful, honest work, sacrificed his time, his strength, his money. But he also recognised that along with this, there had been the inevitable imposing on human credulity, sometimes born of circumstance and necessity, sometimes insisted on by the patients themselves, and fought against as a principle at first resolutely, then less resolutely, and then—no more fighting.

These thoughts and regrets came intermittently into his mind, and were generally dismissed as nuisances. Lately, however, they had not been invading his serenity. He was, in fact, acquiring the habit of taking life and opportunity as he found them. He was developing a love of money.

He was thus putting an ever-widening gap between himself in these later days and that past self of his who had vowed never to accept a fee unless he had honestly earned it, only to minister to really sick people, never to shirk speaking the straightforward truth, and—ah well, there were numberless 'nevers' and they had all been the ideals of a young and generous nature. And where were they? They had been left behind in the past, and silent for many years, were beginning to echo back to him with Margaret Tressider's voice and words:

"Wouldn't you, for instance, take that view if some one had helped you to give up being a sham and a humbug?"

As he sat there given over to these reflections, he had a sudden impulse to look at the book in which he formerly recorded the histories of the cases he had undertaken.

for no fees whatsoever. He had kept these entries separate from his paying cases, in order that he might turn up the name easily and thus be reminded to continue his willing ministrations free of all charge. He opened the bottom drawer of his writing-desk. The book was not there. That had been its usual place, where it was ready for instant reference. He searched elsewhere, and at last found it shunted with other discarded volumes which were no longer part of his everyday professional life. He now began studying it. He had made no entry for two years. This did not mean that he had not given his services fairly generously, from time to time. But it meant to him that he had been withholding from this portion of his work that unsparing human attention and detailed interest which in earlier days he had joyfully bestowed on it.

"I have had no time," he said, frowning as though to an accuser.

"You've been too busy making money," the accuser remarked severely.

"That's absurd," he answered defending himself. "One has to make money nowadays, and plenty of it. It's an expensive age."

"You've crowded out everything else," the accuser persisted. "If you're not careful, you will leave off being a human being, and you will evolve into a machine."

"You are entirely unjust to me," he said fiercely. "I refuse to listen to you further."

"In your innermost heart you know I am not unjust," the accuser returned dispassionately. "And you know that you'll have to listen to me."

Dr Edgar shut the book with a bang and jumped up from his seat. He paced the room. He stood before the fire looking fixedly at the dancing flames.

"Perhaps it is not too late," he said aloud. "Perhaps I could retrace my steps a little. I don't want to become merely a money-making machine. I must begin to retreat at once. It must be done instantly whilst the impulse . . .

Ellis, the respectable man-servant, appeared holding a tablet to which he referred.

"It is eleven o'clock, sir," he said deferentially but firmly. "Mrs Hutchinson's appointment."

"When she comes, tell her I've been called away for an important operation, Ellis," the doctor said crossly. "I don't want to be interrupted just now."

"She is here, sir, and knows that you are in the house. You gave me no instructions about an important operation," Ellis said impassively.

"Well, well, show her in," Dr Edgar returned with impatience.

But he conquered his irritation, pulled himself together, and had managed to adopt a sufficiently self-contained professional manner by the time Mrs Hutchinson reached the consulting room.

She was an old patient of his, and she had long since recovered from the operation which he had performed on her throat three or four years ago. But being nervous about herself, she came to him from time to time; and he fiddled over her tonsils and accepted her guineas. The whole performance only took about five minutes: sometimes even less than that.

"Money easily earned," he generally said as the door closed after her.

But to-day he did not attempt to touch her tonsils. He remained sitting in his chair, and played listlessly with his fountain pen.

"I must tell you, Mrs Hutchinson," he said, "your throat is absolutely well. Very few throats are in such good condition as yours. I am going to give you some advice. Try to forget that you have a throat."

She stared at him in injured astonishment.

"But you have always led me to understand that it needed a little attention from time to time," she said, greatly embarrassed.

"Yes," he answered, "I am aware of that. But it is now

well. And my services are unnecessary to you. But should a crisis occur, you know you may count on me."

He had risen, and, of course, she had risen too. It was a trying moment for her, but she bore herself like a true lady, and opened her purse as usual to take out the time-honoured two guineas. He made a slight movement to arrest her action.

"No work, no fee," he said smiling at her gravely.

She inclined her head in silent acquiescence, shook hands with him and passed through the door which he held open for her. Obviously she was puzzled, as well as wounded. He stood in the middle of the room, looking after her through the closed door. He was himself uneasy; for he knew that he had hurt her feelings and touched up her pride.

"They themselves make it difficult for us to be honest," he said aloud. "They don't want us to be honest. And yet they blame us for being dishonest. Sorry to have distressed her, but I had to begin with some one."

The servant announced another patient. This was a stranger. He was a young schoolmaster from Wales who had broken down entirely in health, and had some serious complications in the throat and ear. Dr Edgar's practised eye saw at once that his circumstances were poor and that the waves of misfortune were overwhelming him. He read, as from an open book, the history of the proud young heart with its bitter disappointments and despairs. The best that was in the surgeon leapt out to hearten this stranger, and to offer him his services as worker to worker. And when he had gone his way comforted, and Dr Edgar had recovered a little from the strain unguessed at by those who do not give themselves out royally, the neglected reference book was opened, and careful entries were made as in the old days.

But he was soon interrupted in his task. The patient this time was Mrs Ermytrude Bending. He rose to greet her with that special deference invariably offered to Ermytrude. Now she had a legitimate ailment, though only he and she

knew of it. It was deafness of the middle ear, from gout. It was surprisingly slight, and it varied, of course, with her condition of health. They rarely referred to the gout, and they spoke of the deafness as 'a very slight defect of the auditory nerves.' It caused her only the faintest inconvenience. It even added to her equipment of superiority. It lent her at times a far away expression of countenance, always interpreted by her admirers as a sign of mental detachment. She was therefore not embarrassed when she had to say: "I am afraid I did not quite hear." She knew that her friends would believe that her thoughts were straying to their natural home, the heights. And it is certain that she had learnt to believe this, too. If she had ever been able to meet herself face to face, she might equally well have used the doctor's own outcry: 'People themselves make it difficult for us to be honest.'

Dr Edgar syringed the outer ear, wrote out a prescription for the gout, and surrendered himself to the pleasure of a few minutes' conversation with Mrs Bending. It would not have entered his head to rise in the usual professional fashion and thus imply that the interview was over. This manner of proceeding was not to be thought of in the case of Mrs Bending. It was she who decided the length of the interview; and she knew by instinct whether he wished to be detained, or desired to be released. This morning, for instance, she glanced at him and concluded from her quick investigation that he would probably be glad for a little chat. She therefore leaned back in the chair, and by the secret and undefinable charm of her presence, gave to that commonplace consulting-room the mental atmosphere of some delightful haven.

Dr Edgar spoke of Edward Bending, her brother-in-law, and was most enthusiastic over the value of his scientific discoveries and the brilliant success of the expedition.

"I have the greatest admiration for him. He is a fine fellow, Mrs Bending," he said. "I hope he will publish his book soon. I long to hear more about him and his men."

Do you know when I listened to his lecture before the Royal Geographical, I wished I had thrown up everything and gone along with him. When you meet a man of that type, some of the old dash and recklessness of boyhood comes back to you and saves you afresh. Ah, his friends must be very proud of him."

Ermyntrude closed her eyes, and then opened them bravely. In spite of the verdict of the world, it was a tremendous effort on her part to appreciate Edward's achievements and character. She had set herself this task, demanded of her by unexpected circumstances, confident that she would be greatly helped by her innate feeling of duty and her strong sense of the family dignity. The memory of the *Times'* article also would lend her valuable and permanent aid. It helped her now.

"We are indeed proud of him," she said, smiling the calm smile of assured ownership. "His honours are gratifying to us all."

"Well, he deserves them," Dr Edgar continued warmly. "And they won't kill the heroic spirit in him. Nothing could kill that. There's your man, and you feel dead sure that he's born to go forth and continue to go forth to the end. He's not married, is he?"

"No, he is not married," Ermyntrude replied, and her thoughts flew off at a tangent to Mrs Rivers whom she was visiting in the afternoon.

"By the way," she added, "do you happen to know a Mrs Rivers? She lives in Old Queen Street, Westminster, No. 30 I think——"

He shook his head.

"Mrs Rivers," he said. "No, I don't remember the name."

"I asked on chance, because I have been requested to call on her," Ermyntrude explained, rising to go. "She is a stranger to me."

"Rivers, Rivers," he repeated. "Now where have I heard that name lately?"

"She lives with her companion, a Miss Margaret Tressider," Ermyntrude said.

Dr Edgar was all eagerness at once. He was on the point of saying that he had met Margaret Tressider and had heard of Mrs Rivers, when some inner prompting restrained him. It was not professional prudence. It was an instinct of loyalty to that woman, a stranger to him until yesterday, who had told him that this friend of hers, Mrs Rivers, evidently of doubtful reputation, had done a tremendous thing for her, and had landed her in circumstances where she could give up being a humbug and a sham. He ranged himself immediately on the side of these two comrades, and, with a slight gesture of impatience said:

"There now, it has gone from me! I hear so many names."

"Of course you do," Ermyntrude answered indulgently. "Well, good-bye, Dr Edgar, and thank you."

Left alone, he sat for a moment thinking of her, and said to himself:

"If there *is* anything to learn in that quarter, I at least don't choose to help her, even indirectly."

And although he had a genuine admiration for Mrs Bending, he found himself smiling as he pictured a meeting between Miss Benbow's niece, who had roamed the world and knew a part of life as it really was, and this sheltered elegant woman who had sipped of life from dainty fountains in cool and shady gardens. The contrast made him long to see Margaret Tressider again. He was wicked enough to hope that she had agitated old Miss Benbow sufficiently to justify him in sending for her and remonstrating with her for her inhumanity. How otherwise could he have the opportunity of seeing her again?

So when he went on his appointed day to Mecklenburgh Square and learned from Sparrowbird that Miss Benbow had been considerably disquieted by her niece's visit, his first thought was: "Hurrah, I can send for Miss Tressider!" It is only fair to add that this outbreak of unworthiness was

followed by immediate concern for his old patient. But once in the presence-chamber, he saw that there was no need for anxiety and no real reason for reprimanding the niece. Disappointment set in. He battled with it, and was rewarded later on in an unexpected manner. He resigned himself to half an hour's patient listening, whilst Miss Benbow railed against Margaret for her uncompromising spirit and unfeeling indifference, her obstinate infatuation for her 'employer,' this woman with a doubtful past, and her unnatural disregard of the family honour. But the chief item of annoyance was the accusation Margaret had brought against her of having no horizon. She constantly referred to this. Dr Edgar needed all his self-control to maintain a gravity of expression suitable for the safeguarding of that part of his yearly income derived solely from Mecklenburgh Square. He succeeded, and, without betraying a ghost of a smile, even attempted to pacify her indignation.

"Come, come, Miss Benbow," he said. "Forget that troublesome niece of yours. I really think you must have a dose of the medicine I prescribed for you. You must calm yourself. Shall I ring for it?"

"Nonsense," she replied. "I won't take any medicine. I told Miss Sparrow so last night. If I've no horizon, none of your absurd medicines will give it to me. No horizon, no horizon. Have you also observed that I have no horizon?"

"No," he answered quite truthfully; for never being on the look-out for a horizon in himself or any one else, he was naturally unobservant of its absence, though he might quickly enough have perceived its presence.

"As you will not take the medicine," he went on, "I should advise you to exercise your remarkable will power, and dismiss your niece from your thoughts. You will not sleep to-night unless you calm yourself. And that trying niece. Would you like me to see her on your behalf, and instruct her that she should for the future leave you undisturbed?"

He smiled then. He believed he had hit on a brilliant idea. Again he was doomed to disappointment.

"There is no need," the old lady replied grimly. "Margaret is willing enough to leave me undisturbed. She was exceedingly lucid on that point. But I do not intend to leave her undisturbed. The truth is, Dr Edgar, there is something about her——"

"Yes, there is——" broke in Dr Edgar eagerly. But he stopped short, partly because he did not wish to commit himself, and partly because Miss Benbow disliked being interrupted.

"There is something about her," continued Miss Benbow glancing at him severely, "which has always interested me, in spite of her hostile attitude. I have no intention of allowing her to escape my influence. She did not tell me a word concerning that person with whom she lives. She told her brother William nothing. But I desire to know. I shall therefore go and find out for myself. I shall visit her and her employer."

"Poor women," thought the Doctor. "They are having a siege."

Aloud he said :

"I don't advise your going, Miss Benbow. Miss Sparrow tells me you have not been out of the house for five years. January is not a suitable month in which to make the experiment. It would be too great a risk. And there is the probability that you would over-excite yourself. Now do be advised by your medical attendant."

There was a pause. Aunt Caroline was thinking.

"If I have stayed in the house for five years," she said, "all the more reason why I should go out at once. You need not trouble to remonstrate with me, for I intend to make this visit, be the month what it may. Perhaps you will feel inclined to come and take care of me. If you have operations, they can be put off."

She waved her hand.

"Operations cannot be put off," he remonstrated, a little on his professional dignity.

"You do not perform operations every minute," she remarked, again waving her hand.

"No, that's true," he replied laughing. "But I think you should stop safely at home."

"I intend to go," she said. "I intend to investigate for myself. Nothing can alter my decision. If you don't wish to have the responsibility, I can easily call in a local practitioner. There are hundreds of them round the corner."

"But I do wish to have the responsibility," he cried with surprising light-heartedness. "Of course I will come with you, if I cannot persuade you to give up your scheme."

She gave him one of her scrutinising glances and laughed softly to herself, amused that her medical attendant should have acceded to her wishes directly she hinted, or rather began to hint, that there were other doctors in the world. She could not know that he was simply longing to go with her, and that his reluctance was an offering to professional duty. The offering having been made in vain, he considered himself at liberty to accompany her on this expedition. He could not prevent her from carrying out her plan, and therefore he was justified in allowing her to help him in fulfilling his own little secret design.

He too laughed softly. He was hugely pleased. He went down the stairs with a schoolboy's step, and almost knocked over Sparrowbird who generally contrived to lie in wait for him in the gloomy hall. Her fragments of talk with him were her only solace in that cheerless atmosphere. He beckoned her into the dining-room and, clapping his book into its accustomed place on the shelf, a sacred place much dusted and tended by Sparrowbird, he said:

"Have you heard that Miss Benbow is going out?"

"Going out?" repeated Miss Sparrow in alarm. "But she has never crossed the threshold for five years. Going out—and in winter?"

"Well, she insists on it," Dr Edgar answered cheerfully. "I've tried to influence her. But in vain. She has made

up her mind to visit Miss Tressider. She desires that I shall go with her."

"To visit Miss Tressider?" Sparrowbird said, greatly agitated. "Oh dear, oh dear. They will be so angry with each other, Dr Edgar. They are not good friends, you know. And Margaret does not mind what she says. And Miss Benbow——"

She broke off. Her timid nature did not permit her to criticise the tyrant upstairs.

"Don't be worried," Dr Edgar said reassuringly. "I shall be there. Nothing much can happen if I'm there. And as for it being January, we can't help that. As Miss Benbow says, be the month what it may, she has decided to venture forth on this Westminster expedition. Plenty of hot water bottles and Jaeger rugs, and a hot cup of cocoa before starting. She probably won't take any harm. People don't as a rule when they're on the war-path. Wonderfully stimulating, the war-path! So don't distress yourself. I have no fears. And you mustn't either. Now mind."

Sparrowbird returned to her duties fortified by her noble-looking Doctor's encouraging words. She was smiling.

"If he's there," she whispered, "all will be well, climate as well as circumstance."

CHAPTER VIII

HARRIET had risen in good spirits that morning, full of happiness over life and everything that life had to offer. Big Ben was striking nine o'clock when she came down to breakfast and discovered Mrs Ermytrude's charming letter. Her joyfulness was immediately increased tenfold. She skipped up to Margaret who was always late, and tossed the acceptable little note into her hands.

"Isn't it delightful of her?" she said excitedly. "Isn't that nicely put about wishing to see without delay his countrywomen who were the first to welcome him safely back from his perilous journey?"

Margaret who was finishing her hair, glanced at the letter and nodded approvingly.

"I shouldn't have thought anyone bearing the name of Ermytrude could have written so genially," she remarked. "A serious name to live up to, that. I suppose she is very refined, poor thing. Well, she can't help it. She'll have to be forgiven. I forgive her freely. I feel in a particularly cheerful mood this morning. A sleepless night, and a splendidly foggy morning. (Don't the trees in the Park look mysterious, Harriet?) What more can a human being demand. And now this reassuring letter. All's well, say I. I do hope there's dried haddock for breakfast."

Harriet laughed.

"There is," she said, and she sank down into the armchair, and clasped her hands behind her neck.

"Margaret, Margaret!" she cried impulsively. "If only I could sweep the past out of my life."

"You have done so," her friend answered. "Now I beg

of you, don't be absurd. You have swept it away, with its mistakes, its regrets and its remorse.

"No," Harriet said, shaking her head. "It does not really go. One only pretends that it goes."

"I don't pretend," Margaret said cheerfully. "Mine has gone, thank goodness. And why not yours?"

"You are ridiculous about that," Harriet answered, smiling a little wistfully. "I've told you dozens of times that we cannot compare our two cases."

"No, we cannot," Margaret said, turning round suddenly. "You only injured yourself. Your brute of a husband did not care. He doesn't count. But I injured myself and dozens of people. That was my livelihood, you remember: imposing on people and telling them a string of lies in exchange for money."

"The world would judge in favour of you rather than of me," Harriet remarked.

"Of course," returned Margaret, "because that is what a great proportion of the world is doing."

And she added:

"You know, I made a curious slip the other day at my beloved Aunt's. I did not mean to include Dr Edgar in the same category as myself when I was telling him how you came and rescued me from my business of imposing on people. But it sounded like that. And he was distinctly huffed. It struck me afterwards that there must have been something at the back of my brain urging me to claim fellowship with him. Probably my knowledge that Aunt Caroline who has never had anything the matter with her for the last hundred years, always pays a doctor a handsome salary for dangle about her. And that her old attendant being dead, Dr Henry Edgar has succeeded to the dignified post of Mecklenburgh medical watch-dog. Only there is nothing to watch, except the plane-trees."

"But you can't blame Dr Edgar," Harriet observed. "It must be difficult for doctors to be honest. We ourselves make it hard for them."

Margaret shrugged her shoulders.

"Perhaps we do," she said brightly. "I never thought of that. Yes, I now picture to myself all those poor saints in Harley Street and Cavendish Square undergoing martyrdoms of moral struggle. And no one to rescue them as I was rescued. No generous-hearted Harriet to stretch out her hands to them. Well, it's certainly odd. But here I am classing myself with them again. There must be something in it, after all! We evidently belong to the same wicked company."

Harriet laughed and crackled Ermyntrude's letter.

"I must go down and answer this," she said. "She asks for an early message."

"And for Heaven's sake, let us be happy," Margaret pleaded. "We ought to be. This is a great day in our new history. The journalists would call it 'a significant moment.' 'Significant' goes very well with 'Ermyntrude,' too. I feel it in my bones that she is cultured, Harriet. Mark my words well."

"Whatever she is, I'm longing to see her," Harriet said eagerly. "And you're right. This is a great day. We will be happy. How I hope she will like me! Do you think she will like me? I wonder whether she too cares for music! Perhaps I could play to her, couldn't I? I must put on my blue dress, mustn't I? And we must have fresh flowers. And new curtains up, Margaret. Everything must be fresh and sweet to welcome her."

After she had gone, Margaret smiled and shook her head.

"Isn't that exactly like her?" she reflected. "She thinks of everything except the real danger to herself, that wretched Paul, our old sign-post. No use warning her about him. She would probably invite him to be present. I must make away with him by murder or some other surreptitious method."

So when she had finished breakfast, she encouraged Harriet to practise Chopin's Barcarolle; and knowing her to be thus intently occupied and not likely to think of other matters for

some time, she stole up to Paul's workroom and found that he was not there. The room had evidently been deserted for several hours.

"Bad luck," she thought. "He has probably been having a long spell of sleep, and that means he will have a long spell of work up here, and I shall be in a fever of anxiety the whole afternoon."

She was watering his flowers, and gathering up some old banana skins and throwing them in the grate, when Paul himself slouched in.

"I've had eighteen hours' sleep," he said.

"I can quite believe it," she answered hopelessly.

"And now I'm going to put in a whole day's work at a new scroll. I'm not pleased with my last," he said. It was not bold enough. It was a failure."

"I came to suggest you should take a whole day's outing," she ventured. "You have not been looking well lately. You mustn't fall ill, you know. You won't be able to work then."

"I don't know what you mean," he said sulkily. "I have never been ill. I'm very busy. I don't want a day's outing."

"It is such a bright fine day that I rather thought of going to Kew myself," she said. "I'm longing to see some signs of spring. I hoped you would care to go with me. Of course it is very early for the snowdrops, but there might chance to be an obliging few; and in any case there are the greenhouses. Won't you come?"

"No, no," he said roughly. And he sat down at his bench, and without taking any further notice of Margaret, seized his bow-saw and began to cut out from a block of maple wood the neck and scroll of a fiddle, following carefully the markings which he had made on the previous day. The lovely and graceful thing at which he had been working for several days past, lay on the floor by his side. He paused in his task, stooped down to pick up the fallen idol, shook his head in evident doubt and disapproval, turned it over, looked at it from every point of view, and after staring straight in

front of him for some time, finally smiled and muttered some mysterious words to himself.

"I believe I see now," he said aloud, and glancing in the direction of Margaret, he became conscious once more of her presence and beckoned to her to bend over him.

"Look here," he began, "this is the fault in this scroll. The chin is poor. The grooves around the volute are not deep enough. Can't think how I made that mistake. You see—oh, but you wouldn't understand."

Margaret waited patiently. She was hoping that some idea would strike her, or that some incident would occur which might help her to form a safe and definite plan for preventing Paul from wrecking the afternoon's pleasure.

As a rule neither she nor Harriet lingered in his workshop. He preferred to be alone. Margaret knew that she was running the risk of being dismissed, not rudely, for Paul could never have been rude, but simply, as a child might say: "please go, I don't want you." But at present he gave no sign of resenting her continuance there; and owing to pressure of circumstance, she grew bold, and determined to plunge headlong into the subject.

She did not intend to ask him definitely to keep out of the way; but she hoped to be able to suggest subtly that much depended on Harriet's happiness this afternoon, and that it would be advisable if she were left entirely alone with Mrs Ermytrude Bending. Margaret believed that perhaps some stray shot might reach Paul's queer and fitful mind. She had often been surprised by his sudden flashes of sympathetic understanding, especially where Harriet was concerned. Once or twice she had even noticed a feeble attempt at protectiveness. True, it died at its birth; but the fact remained that it was born.

She had drawn up a stool near his second bench, and she was trying to disengage some dates and figs from a medley of fiddle strings, sand paper, fine shavings, strips of linen, and small lengths of purfling, and glue brushes more or less sticky. Paul did not like his materials to be touched:

but he was always rather pleased to have his food separated from the tiresome things which sometimes clung to it. He glanced at Margaret and nodded approvingly.

"Thank you," he said. "I think I could eat a fig or two now."

She handed him a couple and he ate them at once. He seemed particularly normal and contented. Margaret resolved to seize the moment.

"Have you noticed how happy Harriet looks, Paul?" she asked.

"Of course she looks happy," he said. "We're all happy here. And now I've thought of the new scroll, that will make us still happier, won't it?"

"Yes," she answered smiling at him and passing a large piece of cucumber which she had peeled for him. He took a good-sized bite out of it and crunched it with evident relish.

She continued:—

"You see, Paul, there is no doubt that Captain Bending admires her very much. That naturally makes her happy."

"Does it?" Paul asked without showing the least interest. "I believe this block of maple is going to be the best I've ever got a neck and scroll from. I wasn't really satisfied with the other from the beginning. The grain didn't run evenly."

"Captain Bending has asked his sister-in-law to come and call here," Margaret persevered. "She is coming this afternoon."

Paul did not look up. He was intent on the wood, and all his thoughts were with the new scroll. But Margaret had made up her mind that he should listen for once.

"Paul," she repeated gently, "Captain Bending has asked his sister-in-law to come and call here. She is coming this afternoon."

"Oh, is she?" he said. "Why is she coming? We don't want her here. We don't want strangers. Tell her to keep away. I don't want to see her."

"Nor do I," said Margaret eagerly, now seeing her way clear before her. "And Paul, I've been thinking that as you and I don't want to see her, we'd better let Harriet have her all to herself. A cosy tea all to herself. And you and I staying up in our rooms, you know, until she has gone. It would be better for Harriet too."

"Better for Harriet," he said slowly. He laid down his saw. He looked troubled.

"Yes," answered Margaret, who was not watching him. "And there would be no risk of any kind."

"Risk," he said in a strange tone of voice. "What risk? Risk to Harriet?"

Margaret turned round suddenly and saw him leaning back in his chair, his busy hands listless, his face sadly harassed, his mind struggling to formulate to itself something which was beyond its range. She had not the heart to continue.

"Well, I must be off to Duck Island to see how my pelicans are bearing the winter," she said cheerily. "I have an appointment with my friend, the keeper. Good luck to the new scroll! But it's my valuable opinion that you will never improve on this last handsome chap. And I think his chin is splendid, Paul. I beg of you, don't destroy him."

Her words recalled him to his own familiar mental territory, and before she left the room, she had the satisfaction of seeing him smiling once more over his beloved work, whistling softly to himself as he often did when the vision of a graceful curve rose before him, and happy in his entire forgetfulness of all matters not bearing on the glorious art of fiddle-making.

"It is impossible to make him understand," she said to herself as she closed the door gently and went downstairs. "And cruel to tax his poor brain. I'm a beast. We must just take our chance."

But she had made more impression than she thought. Perhaps she would have called herself still more of a beast

if she could have looked into Paul's tangled mental machinery, and seen the pitiful struggles of the separate parts to adjust themselves for normal and concentrated action. He worked contentedly for some time, but suddenly threw aside a file which he had been using, and began to walk about the room in restless fashion. At first he examined two or three of the unvarnished fiddles, his own handiwork, hanging on the wall; then he scrutinised a back on which he had been testing his latest experiments in varnish. But in the midst of considering it he said aloud:

"Risk, what risk? Risk to Harriet? What did she mean?"

The thought passed from his mind, and he again began contemplating the maple-back. He put it close up to his eyes, held it away from him, let the light fall on it, the shadows also, and finally applied to it a strong lens, in order to see more clearly the effect of the varnish on the grain. He nodded his head. He was pleased. Suddenly his face clouded over.

"Risk," he repeated. "What risk? Risk to Harriet? What did she mean?"

He stood in the middle of the room; his hand sought his forehead and pressed it tightly; it fell a little and covered his eyes; it fell once more and clutched his chin. There was an intensely painful expression on his face.

"Something about Captain Bending," he said. "And——"

He made another tremendous effort with his brain.

"Yes, and about some woman calling here," he continued. "And our not coming down till she'd gone. She said that. And——"

He stroked his forehead wearily and glanced in the direction of his bench. But he did not move.

"Ah, yes," he exclaimed. "I have it. Better for Harriet. And no risk. That's what she said. What did she mean? And Captain Bending—something about Captain Bending——"

The continuity of his thoughts broke again, but again he

taxed his mental powers to their utmost and pieced together the fragments of his memory.

"Something about Captain Bending liking her very much. Robert liked her very much. He loved her. He told me to . . . Now what did he tell me? Ah, I'll go and ask her. She'll remember."

He gave a great sigh of relief and ran downstairs to the drawing-room where Harriet was still practising Chopin's Barcarolle. She looked up as he came rushing in, and saw the tired and bewildered expression on his face. She had no time to ask him any questions, for he began at once excitedly :

"Something about Captain Bending liking you very much. And our staying upstairs to-day because there would be no risk. Better for you and no risk. Some woman coming to call. Why should she come to call? And what risk? I want to know. Robert loved you. He told me to . . . what did he tell me, Harriet? I've been trying to think—I——"

"I can't," he said simply. He shook his head. His arms, which he had been waving about, fell limply down. He had given up the struggle.

Harriet had risen and slipped her arm through his. The angry flush on her face was curiously at variance with the tender voice in which she spoke to the stricken man.

"Paul, dear," she said, "there is no risk. And it's always better for me when you are with me. That's what is meant by being better for me. Yes, Robert loved me, didn't he? And he told me to look after you, and you to look after me. That's what he told you. Don't you remember now? And always to keep the best fiddle for me. And my piano tuned. It wants tuning now. Won't you do it now?"

"Yes, yes," he said brightening up immediately and forgetting all his troubles.

She helped him to remove the top of the Steinway, found the key for him, and left him smiling happily as he stuffed it into his workman's apron and began testing for himself the condition of the instrument. She then hastened away to find Margaret who was in the

dining-room arranging the flowers and singing over her pleasant task. She did not look up as Harriet came in, and being therefore unaware of the impending storm which had gathered surprising force, she said light-heartedly :

"Such lovely roses, Harriet! 'Quong really does buy awfully well. Better than I do. Look at this fat fellow."

Harriet took the flower held out to her and tossed it angrily on to the table.

"What have you been saying to Paul?" she broke out. "I'm perfectly disgusted with you. I've told you time after time that Paul is not to be interfered with. If I choose him to be here, then he shall be here. I know quite well what I'm doing, and don't need you to point out to me what course of action I should take in my own house. I suppose you'll say that you only acted for my good, and that you meant well. I don't want anyone to do anything for my good—and people that mean well are detestable nuisances. I will not have Paul's feelings hurt. I will not have that poor brain of his stirred up. Do you hear me? Once for all, will you please take this from me? If you can't, then we must part. It's the only thing I've ever asked you to do for me, and apparently you can't do it. The fact is, you've no pity in your heart. If you had a grain of it, you'd understand without my telling you. But whether you understand or not, I'll not have Paul interfered with. I don't ask you to be kind to him. That's too much to expect, apparently. I only ask you to spare him. I insist on that. And as for Mrs Ermytrude Bending, a hundred Mrs Ermytrude Bendings might come at the same time, and Paul's place is where he chooses it to be. Have I at last made myself clear?"

She did not wait for an answer. She dashed out of the room leaving poor Margaret half stupefied by the suddenness of the attack. She had become rather pale. There was a slight twitch perceptible on her face, but she continued arranging the flowers in bowls, and afterwards chose a Russian cigarette from a favourite box, lit it and leaned back in the rocking chair which she touched into slight movement.

"At these moments," she said aloud, "I ask myself whether it wasn't rather jolly telling people's fortunes at a dollar a piece. And my poor crystal! Alas! we drowned it in the bay. Well, perhaps it is best there. And I am best here. But there certainly are moments when——" She broke off and was lost in silent thought, but when she lit her second cigarette, she addressed herself:

"My girl, you are not intended for friendship. You're too much of an ass. Believe me, people don't want to be hedged around. They have to be as lonely as you've been to recognise the benefit of sheltering kindness. And even then perhaps they don't want it. They'll say to you: 'What did you do it for? No one asked you.' That's all you'll get for your trouble. Pardon me, but you're an ass."

As she lingered undisturbed in her solitude, a great longing seized her to meet someone in her life's path who would understand her, see eye to eye with her, appreciate her motives, discount her faults. Lucky creatures, those, who got that! But did they get it? Probably with them also, as with herself, nothing worked out, and they too were blindly searching for a strong staff to support them in their own special difficulties. Certainly nothing had ever worked out with her, and nothing ever would.

Still, it was of no use to start a morbid mood; and of course, theoretically, it was ridiculous to be upset by one of Harriet's tempers which were unalterable laws of nature, and had to be accepted as elemental contingencies from which there was no appeal. No one could appeal to a tornado, for instance. The justice or injustice of it did not come into the question. And really, if one was foolish enough to begin to turn things over in one's mind, Harriet had most of the right on her side, since it was quite true that Paul ought not to be interfered with. But it was untrue to say that her heart was without pity for him, and that kindness could not be expected from her where he was concerned. Why, it was to her he turned. Harriet had said this scores of times. Scores of times she had said that Margaret's way of dealing with Paul in some

of his queer moods was simply admirable, and that she wished she had the knack. And now? Oh, but it was only the tornado." Utterly absurd not to remember that it was only the tornado, and that one must get up, shake oneself and realise that one was not so much the worse after all. Perhaps better. Another lesson learnt which would be immediately forgotten. In any case Harriet must be punished. So she would go out, and leave her and Paul to entertain Mrs Ermytrude Bending. Yes, that was a splendid idea, with a spice of viciousness in it which was both comforting and stimulating.

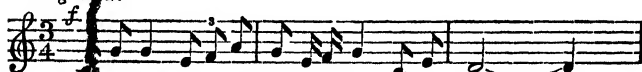
"Yes, Harriet must be punished," she remarked getting up from her chair suddenly. "I didn't give up being shoddy in order to be bullied. Much better to be shoddy. Well, a new hat as I'm down in the dumps, a good little lunch at the Gourmets, and a French play. If possible, a flirtation with some one or other. If not, no matter."

In less than a quarter of an hour she had left the house and was making her way across St James's Park, stopping on the bridge to see if there were any view towards Whitehall or Buckingham Palace. Yes, the fog had lifted, and a tolerably unpleasant morning was struggling valiantly to become pleasant. Weather mattered little to Margaret. She, even as many Londoners, held to a childlike belief in the unalterable perfection of the London climate, with all its surprises.

She walked up St James's Street, crossed Piccadilly, nearly got run over by a motor in Bond Street, and arrived safely at a milliner's in Conduit Street, where she intended to buy her new hat. Her spirits rose as she went up the stairs; and at the back of her brain lay the anticipation of the second pleasure which she had planned, that good little lunch at the cosy little French restaurant in Lisle Street, where the personal note was still being sounded clearly amidst the din and helter-skelter of modern conditions. Happy as she was in her present luxurious surroundings, she dearly loved to escape from time to time to a Bohemian atmosphere, and pretend to minister to the vagabond-spirit always stirring

within her. It was only a pretence, of course, but it answered its purpose. And to-day when she retreated from the milliner's, having spent far more than she intended, it amused her exceedingly to think that her recklessness had only left her two or three shillings in her purse. That haunting song of Alfred Bruneau, 'L'Heureux Vagabond' * came into her mind. It was her favourite little song, and it always visited her when she was feeling careless and irresponsible. She sang it now.

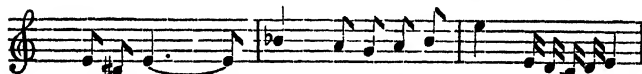
Largement.



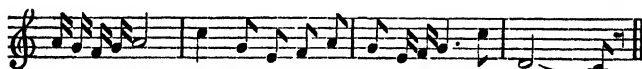
J'en vais par les che-mins, li-re-lin, et la plai-ne,
Un vo-leur sur le che-min, li-re-lin, dans ma po-che,



Dans mon sac j'ai du pain blanc, li-re-lan, et trois é-cus
m'a vo-lé mes trois é-cus, li-re-lu, "Vo leur prends la



dans ma po-che; J'ai dans mon cœur fleu-ri (chante, rossignol,
poche aus-si! " J'ai dans mon cœur fleu-ri (chante, rossignol,



chante si je ris!) j'ai dans mon cœur jo-li, li-re-li, ma mi-e!
chante si je ris!) j'ai dans mon cœur jo-li, li-re-li, ma mi-e!

Some one spoke her name. She looked round and saw Dr Edgar.

"You do walk quickly," he said. "I thought I should never overtake you."

"Was I walking quickly?" she asked nodding pleasantly. "I thought I was sauntering, like L'Heureux Vagabond. Do you know him? Well, listen:

"Je m'en vais par les chemins, lirelin, et la plaine,

"Dans mon sac j'ai du pain blanc, lirelan, et trois écus dans ma poche."

Please forgive me. I am feeling particularly light-hearted. I've just spent my last five-pound note on an absurd hat, and I've recovered from a severe fit of temper. What a relief it is when one's rage abates, isn't it?"

"Yes," he replied laughing. "I hope I shan't stir it up again when you hear what I have to tell you."

"I imagine you are going to scold me about my aunt," she said. "I don't care. Scold away. Let me impress on you that I could have said far worse things than I did say, but I restrained myself nobly because I promised you I would remember her age. I suppose I've made her ill. Well, it can't be helped. I assure you I could have been twice as disagreeable as I was."

"The funny part of it is that you haven't made her ill," he returned. "You appear to have exhilarated her. She is annoyed at having been told that she has no horizon, but this grave charge has stimulated, not depressed her. She has, I fear, no intention of leaving you alone. She has made up her mind to investigate your surroundings. She is coming to call on you, and she insists that I should accompany her. There you have the bad news in a nutshell, Miss Tressider. I tried to dissuade her, urging that the effort would be too great for her. She said she could take no harm if her medical attendant accompanied her. And—well—you know Miss Benbow generally gets her own way. Have I roused that rage of yours?"

"No, not at all," Margaret answered, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "I'm quite delighted. I hope she will let me know the exact day, so that I may secure the co-operation of a respectable clergyman and his wife, trusted friends of mine in Whitechapel, who always come and give a tone to me when necessary."

"You shall certainly be told," he said. "I think Miss Benbow will fix on Friday, as I have a free afternoon then. This is only Tuesday. So you will have time to make arrangements."

"Yes," Margaret answered cheerfully, "and to recover

from another investigation of our circumstances. For this very afternoon, a lady with the superior name of Ermyntrude will cross what Aunt Caroline and my brother William would call our sinful threshold."

"Yes, I know," Dr Edgar said smiling. "You mean Mrs Ermyntrude Bending, the explorer's sister-in-law."

"Now how on earth have you learnt that?" she asked. "You are wonderful. I shall begin to think you are a witch doctor, and have second sight."

"Mrs Bending is my patient," he explained. "She told me she was calling on a Mrs Rivers in Old Queen Street. She asked for information."

"What a nuisance!" Margaret said impatiently.

"Not at all," he answered quietly. "My memory did not serve me as to the name. And——"

"That was awfully good of you," Margaret broke in, warmly.

"And," he continued, "it is an advantage that I am able to tell you that Mrs Bending is a very—well—she is a charming woman, she is well read and artistic and admirable, and all that, but—well, how shall I put it—ah, she's perhaps rather—over cultured."

"Aha," cried Margaret, smiling a little uneasily. "I suspected as much when I heard her name."

"I should advise you," he continued in the same quiet impersonal way, as though he were ordering a patient out to South Abyssinia, "to—to look out for rocks."

"Thank you," Margaret said. "We will."

She was silent a moment, and then remarked:

"So Captain Bending really has a 'superior' sister-in-law. Well, I hope nevertheless she appreciates him. He is a fine fellow."

"Do you know him?" Dr Edgar asked, with great interest.

"Yes," she answered casually. "We met him at Tromsö. He had just come back from his expedition."

"I say," he cried boyishly, "you were in luck's way! I have the greatest admiration for that man, and envy him."

They had walked as far as Piccadilly Circus, and there she paused before crossing the road to get into Wardour Street, and thence into Lisle Street.

"My way lies over there," she said. "I am going to have lunch at the Gourmets. I was intending to go to the New Royalty afterwards to see Coquelin in 'Les Affaires sont les Affaires.' But now I shall have to hurry home and look out for rocks. An awful nuisance, because I had made up my mind to sulk for the remainder of the day. Mrs Rivers annoyed me this morning, and I had determined to punish her. If one does not show spirit, one becomes a Sparrowbird."

He nodded gravely. Sparrowbird's condition always troubled him.

"But there are limits to punishment," she added. "A superior woman represents my limit. Well, goodbye, Dr Edgar. Tell my Aunt Caroline that I shall be delighted to see her, and so will Mrs Rivers, and that I have lots more to say to her, and that as she is bringing her medical attendant, I shall feel quite at liberty not to consider her great age. I shall keep Friday free. Goodbye."

"But why should I not lunch at the Gourmets too?" he said decidedly. "I have still a whole hour to spare. A doctor must have a little time off for himself."

"Yes, of course he must, poor thing," Margaret said, nodding to one of her favourite flower women standing by the fountain. "I am beginning to sympathise with West End doctors. Mrs Rivers considers they are much tried by adversity, and that there is no one to help them."

He laughed softly, and they passed on together to the Gourmets. There they ensconced themselves in the middle room, at François's table, and were soon engaged in the pleasant task of eating steak à la Tornado, pommes de terre sautées, and a delicious salad. Monsieur came to greet them, and Madame smiled her salutations from the bureau. The fat journalist reposed in his accustomed corner. The handsome Polish photographer strolled in from her studio hard by. The little antiquarian was holding his usual animated

discussion with his embittered friend, a disappointed architect. A business woman of severe and self-contained aspect was beginning to thaw under François's soothing ministrations. His comforting way of presenting the *mênu* would have melted the heart of the sternest Spartan, male or female, but especially female. The middle-aged actor, who had been down on his luck for some time, had evidently scored at last; for he sent for a bottle of his favourite wine. Monsieur in passing glanced at it, smiled sympathetically and said "Aha, très bien, très bien." Yes, there was no doubt that the personal note still existed at the Gourmets. No one was hustled off to make room for a newcomer. The guests in possession were obviously on their own rightful territory. Bald-headed little Monsieur had learnt the useful lesson that the true restaurant keeper, even as the true doctor, should appear to grant unlimited leisure to the consideration of each individual case.

So Margaret and Dr Edgar lingered on undisturbed, sipping their coffee at their ease. They talked on all manner of subjects—London life, the ever-increasing noise in the streets, the American invasion of London, Aunt Caroline, Sparrow-bird, the suffragists, by-elections, the new President of the Board of Trade, airships, and Captain Bending's expedition to the North Pole. Margaret was astonished at the doctor's eager interest in the explorer, and expressed her surprise that Upper Brook Street could have any sympathy with the Polar regions.

"Ah, I see you have a great deal to learn," he said, "even although you have been moving about the world. Let me tell you that the 'call of the wild' is heard everywhere—even in Upper Brook Street. Anyway I hear it—especially these last days."

"Well, I think all the better of you for hearing it," she said light-heartedly. "And all the better of the district too! Yes, I evidently have a great deal to learn. And so you would really have liked to ship as doctor in the *Canute*. What a hard fate that you couldn't! But there will be other

chances—Arctic and Antarctic too. How I hope you'll go. I love to hear of people breaking away from their habits and duties and making a dash for something they want to do—a reckless dash into the unknown. Ah, here is Monsieur with the reckoning. No, please don't get out your money. Do let me settle up with the few remaining pence left from the absurd hat, so that, like 'L'Heureux Vagabond,' I can have nothing left—'plus de pain blanc ni d'écus, lirelu!' Thank you for humouring me."

"I shall take you back to Westminster," he said, looking at the clock. "I still have some time. May I come?"

"Yes," she answered. "Come and see to what scenes of iniquity you are proposing to bring your venerable and innocent patient. We have a public-house round the corner, 'The Two Chairmen.' Aunt Caroline won't approve of that. And there's a large Della Robbia plaque of the Madonna and child outside the house next to ours. She won't approve of that either. And I don't suppose she'll approve of the view of St James's Park. She never did like views. She always preferred walls—Mecklenburgh walls. But come and judge for yourself."

So they continued their spell of companionship as far as Westminster, and he left her outside No. 30 Old Queen Street. She asked him to go in, but his time of leisure was over, much to his disgust. He watched her open the door with her latchkey and disappear from his sight.

A sense of loss and desolation suddenly overpowered him.

"This is quite absurd," he said to himself sternly. "He battled with it, and was passing down the road, when the door of No. 30 opened and Margaret recalled him, a ring of mischief in her voice and a look of mischief in her eyes.

"For pity's sake let me know definitely about Friday, won't you?" she said. "Of course we may not survive this afternoon, but it's best to be on the safe side, and I must make arrangements with my clerical friends. And, by the way, I think you should warn Aunt Caroline that we have a Chinese servant. She may be frightened of him. He is

quite harmless. You see how thoughtful I am learning to be for her great age. Good-bye."

He hurried away with a smile on his face. She closed the door and sank down on a couch outside the drawing-room, reading a letter which she found on the oak chest.

Harriet had heard her, and came running downstairs to greet her. She put out both hands and hung her beautiful head in real shame.

"Margaret, forgive me," she said gently. "I think you must know how ashamed I am."

"I did mind you accusing me of not having any pity for Paul," Margaret said strictly.

"Paul himself has punished me," Harriet said pleadingly. "He has been so disagreeable about the piano-tuning. He left it half finished, and went back to his workroom. And when I asked him to come down again, he said that I could very well finish it myself, and that he did not like to be disturbed by anyone except you, and that you were the only sensible person in the house. I thought it would cheer you up to know how mortified I feel."

"It does," Margaret answered, pacified. "And listen, Harriet. I meant to sulk the whole day and desert you. You deserved that fate. But I've learnt that my instincts about the lady bearing the name of Ermyntrode were correct. She is a superior, cultured woman. Isn't it appalling? So I've returned to stand by."

CHAPTER IX

IT was raining. Mrs Ermytrude Bending rang at Mrs Rivers's door, and was a little startled to have it opened by a friendly-looking Chinaman, who in answer to her question said: "Mrs Livers at home."

She never had appreciated the unexpected, and it was unfortunate that her nerves should have been slightly jarred at the very beginning of her visit. Moreover the rain always annoyed her. Privately she considered the rain to be an impertinence. So in order to put herself right with herself, she found it necessary to adopt an imperial bearing, with the natural result that her entrance into the room produced in Harriet's mind feelings of bewilderment mingled with anxiety and disappointment. She knew at once that she would never be able to win this woman's approval; but she determined not to allow herself to be quelled in her own house, and summoning together her spirit and her charm, she received Captain Bending's superior sister-in-law in a manner which gave no hint of uneasiness or apprehension. She treated her exactly like an ordinary human being on equal terms, thanked her for her kind letter, and said she had been greatly looking forward to seeing her. She showed her every true courtesy short of deference.

But it was precisely that note of deference which Ermytrude missed, and to which she had been accustomed all her life. Harriet's charm and gracious beauty, calculated to make pleasant appeal to most people, counted for nothing in Ermytrude's judgment, because unaccompanied by instinctive homage to herself. She was by no means an ungenerous nature, and she would have been capable of admiring Harriet's beauty whole-heartedly and appreciating her gallant

presence at least theoretically, if only that one little necessary condition had been fulfilled at the outset. To do her justice, considering that her nerves were a little out of gear and her passion for homage unsatisfied, she acquitted herself with remarkable tactfulness in speaking of her famous brother-in-law, and of his pleasant meeting with his countrywomen at Tromsø.

"It was delightful that after nearly three years' absence he should have been welcomed back by English people," she said. "I wish I could have been there myself; but the journey to Tromsø is a serious undertaking for anyone who is not a good sailor, or indeed a good traveller in any circumstances. And I hear that you are both."

"Yes," answered Harriet. "I was born at sea. Perhaps that has something to do with it."

"How interesting," said Ermytrude sweetly. "You had a spacious birthplace, certainly."

"Yes," laughed Harriet. "The Indian Ocean, nothing smaller than that! Captain Bending and I had some fun over my birthplace. He pretended to be envious of me. For it appears that he was born only at the sea, whereas I was born on it. And he made his first sea journey in a herring-boat, and I mine in—"

"Yes," broke in Ermytrude a little prematurely. She was terribly anxious for information.

"—in a P. & O.," Harriet continued, not noticing her visitor's eagerness. "In a fearful storm, I believe."

"Your poor mother," Ermytrude put in benevolently.

"Yes," Harriet said simply. "She died. They buried her at sea."

"That was sad too," Ermytrude said again, with an increase of gentle benevolence.

"Oh, I don't know," Harriet answered impulsively. "You must remember she came of sea-faring people."

"Ah, yes," Ermytrude murmured, longing to ask questions, but wisely restraining herself.

"And people intimately connected with the sea, look

upon it as their own fireside," Harriet went on. "So I always feel that my mother died in her own home."

"Ah yes," Ermyntrude acquiesced sympathetically. "Tradition of circumstance puts a different colour on everything, does it not?"

And she added :

"That is what my brother-in-law is always saying when I have been foolish enough to deplore the risks and dangers to which he necessarily exposes himself. You see, the Bendings have always had the rover's instinct in them. Captain Bending's father and grandfather were both great travellers; and my own dear husband, who was a China merchant, had the same love of enterprise as his brother, though in his case it found a different expression."

She paused, consecrating a moment's silence to the memory of her husband, and then went on :

"Well, as I was saying, I greatly regretted that I could not be at Tromsø. It must have been a wonderful experience to witness the triumphant return of the travellers."

"It was quite thrilling," Harriet said, warming up. "I shall never forget it. And although I knew nothing of Captain Bending personally, I felt glad and proud that it was an Englishman this time who had led the gallant expedition. You can imagine how excited I and my friend Miss Tressider were afterwards when we met him at our own little hotel, Fru Andersen's hotel, and were introduced to him by our friend the whale-lady."

"The whale-lady?" asked Ermyntrude with a faint note of disapproval in her voice.

"Yes," laughed Harriet, now thoroughly happy over the remembrance of that delightful time. "We called her that, you know. She was a merchant in whales. She owned several whalers, and financed others."

"A strange profession for a woman," Ermyntrude remarked vaguely.

"Yes," laughed Harriet again. "But we were all a strange company there. Odds and ends of people from many

different parts of the world. That is what made the company so interesting. No chance of being dull there. And Fru Kjaever, the whale-lady, was the brightest of all. She had known Captain Bending for a long time. So of course it was a piece of good luck to be introduced by her.

"Of course," Ermytrude said gravely. "And she had known you for a long time, I suppose."

"Oh, no," returned Harriet, not seeing the subtle import of Ermytrude's remark. "But we had been in the same little unconventional Norwegian hotel for several weeks, and one gets intimate under such conditions, specially at a place like Tromsø, which is an outpost of the world. A week there does the work of six months elsewhere."

"Really?" said Ermytrude.

"Yes," continued Harriet. "We used to laugh and say that the growth of friendship there was as quick as the growth of the plants. They have to make haste, you see, because they only have a limited amount of time and sunshine in which to come to perfection."

"But that is true of most things, alas!" Ermytrude observed sententiously.

"Yes, of course it is," Harriet answered gaily. "The Madagascar missionary was always harping on 'the fleeting moments' as he called them, and in such flowery language too."

"The Madagascar missionary," Ermytrude repeated, in some surprise. "And do you understand Madagascan?"

"He had an interpreter," Harriet explained, "a very queer, weird sort of man. He could be extremely disagreeable, but he was generally kind to us. He was fond of music,—and, well, that is the only thing I can do, music. When he cared, I used to play."

"My brother-in-law spoke of your beautiful playing," Ermytrude conceded graciously.

"Did he?" Harriet asked eagerly.

"It was refreshing to him to hear music after having been deprived of it for so long," Ermytrude said, closing her eyes. "I can understand that. I should feel that, for I myself am

a lover of music. I hope I also shall have the pleasure of hearing you play. And do you perhaps get your charming gift from your mother or your father? I think it is always interesting to know to which side we owe our talents and tendencies."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" Harriet replied frankly, in her simple innocence, quite unconscious of any pitfall. "Well, I owe my music to my father entirely. My mother's people were naval people for many generations, and I never heard that they had any artistic leanings. But my father——"

"Yes," interposed Ermyntrude encouragingly.

"My father came of musicians, and was himself a musician," Harriet continued. "Not by profession. He had no——"

At that moment the door opened and Margaret appeared.

"Ah," said Harriet, breaking off. "My friend, Miss Tressider."

A wave of annoyance swept over Mrs Ermyntrude Bending. She had purposely been speaking of Captain Bending's family, and had intended to dwell at some length on her own antecedents and relatives: so that, by a natural process of imitation, Harriet might be impelled to give some detailed account of her people. Just as her subtle plan was beginning to work, it was frustrated by the arrival of this unnecessary third person. Ermyntrude glanced at her and took an instinctive dislike to her, which was heartily reciprocated by Margaret herself. The Captain's sister-in-law stiffened up, and fortified herself in her unassailable castle of superiority. Margaret, who did not feel in the least intimidated by this dread personage, would have liked to show how amused she was by this royally-forbidding manner. But she remembered that this woman had to be conciliated, and her condescension condoned, for the sake of the advantages which would be secured by her good-will, or rather by the absence of ill-will; for Margaret knew immediately that neither she nor Harriet had any chance of winning Mrs Bending's admiration or approval.

"I only hope she has not been worming facts out of Harriet," she thought, as she pressed the bell for the tea.

"You were speaking of your father," Ermyntitude ventured, turning again to Harriet

"Ah," thought Margaret, "so she had only got as far as the father. Good thing I came in when I did. No harm in her speaking about her father, specially as he died when she was a youngster. Quite safe that."

Harriet was always glad to speak of her father, for whom she had retained a romantic and enthusiastic affection.

"Yes, I was telling you that music was not his profession," she said eagerly. "He was a man of means, and he gave up all his time to the comparative study of the music of the different nations. And he composed a good deal. I used to love to hear him play. When I had been naughty, my punishment was that he did not allow me to sit in the room when he was improvising. I was only a child at the time of his death, thirteen or fourteen years old, but I remember vividly all the splendid hours we passed together. Everyone seemed so dull after him."

She rose in her impulsive way, and took from the mantelpiece the old-fashioned photograph of an interesting-looking man of about forty. She put it in Ermyntitude's hands. Ermyntitude gazed at it with benevolent but critical eye, and made a mental note that Mrs Rivers's father was evidently a gentleman, although he had a wild and irresponsible expression of countenance.

"The artistic temperament," she murmured sympathetically.

"Yes, no doubt about that," Harriet answered, gratified by Mrs Bending's remark; for of course she had no means of knowing that Ermyntitude did not really admire the artistic temperament, and that her interest in it was a pose, and by process of time, a habit which had ended by deceiving herself as well as her circle in which she moved and held sway.

Tea was now brought in by the silently-gliding Quong, and Ermyntitude who had forgotten his existence, immediately suffered from a second attack of jarring surprise at the sight

of his immobile Chinese face, his almond eyes, his long pig-tail and his richly-embroidered silk coat. She was however too superior to show any outward signs of amazement, and turning to Margaret, with whom up to that moment she had not exchanged a single word of conversation, she made a really praiseworthy effort to be agreeable to this person whose existence she considered to be unnecessary.

"It is a mild winter, is it not?" she said with one of her gracious smiles. "Rainy, but distinctly mild to-day, for instance."

"The weather is of no great consequence to me," Margaret answered in her casual way, "though I would rather have it cold."

Ermyntrude tried again.

"Captain Bending tells me that you are a scholar as well as a traveller," she said pleasantly.

"Oh, I don't know why he should say that," Margaret replied off-handedly. "I've picked up a smattering of a few languages, in the same way that I've knocked about the world a good deal, and gathered nothing."

"That is your modesty, no doubt," Ermyntrude said sweetly.

"Oh no, I'm not at all modest," Margaret asserted in a metallic tone of voice.

"Yes, she is," Harriet put in generously. "She knows a tremendous deal about books and people, Mrs Bending. And as for languages, why, she can even speak modern Greek."

"Indeed," said Ermyntrude a little stiffly, annoyed to think that anyone except herself had any real claims to scholarship. "Indeed."

"Well, there is nothing wonderful in that, considering that I was governess in a Greek family for many years," Margaret laughed.

"It must nevertheless be delightful to converse fluently in the modern development of the language of the great Homer," Ermyntrude remarked closing her eyes. "I envy you, Miss Tressider."

"The interpreter maintained that she ought to have been

an interpreter," Harriet went on proudly. "He said he had never before met anyone who picked up Madagascan words so easily."

"What a useful gift to help one through life!" Margaret exclaimed. "The power of picking up Madagascan quicker than anyone else! I see a millionaire's fortune in it!"

Even Ermyntrude smiled. It crossed her mind that Margaret might be passable at an 'At Home.' She appeared to be original, and she was not dull. And Mrs Rivers's playing, if really as exceptional as Edward reported, might be useful at a musical party. Of course she would take the precaution of hearing her play before she committed herself to an invitation; but she reflected that if her own verdict were satisfactory, an invitation to an evening 'At Home' would be an admirable preliminary to further acquaintanceship, and would reassure Edward that she was carrying out his wishes and interesting herself in his friends. She turned to Harriet and said:

"I have been paying you a very long visit. But before I go, I should much like to have the pleasure of hearing you play. As I told you, I am an intense lover of music. Will you not grant me the same privilege that you granted to my brother-in-law and the interpreter?"

"I shall be delighted," Harriet replied smiling, and she rose at once and went to the piano.

"She is at her best at the piano," Margaret said to Mrs Bending proudly. "She is a real artiste. She ought to have been a professional."

She was looking up at Ermyntrude as she spoke, and her perceptions being as quick as lightning, she observed that *Mrs Bending had not heard her.*

"Why, I do believe she is deaf," Margaret thought. "How very funny."

She raised her voice and repeated her remark. Ermyntrude, heard this time, heard that the voice was raised too, and flushed ever so slightly with annoyance that this nondescript person had discovered her safely-guarded secret.

But at this moment Harriet touched the key-board. There was no mistaking the masterly and masterful manner in which she identified herself at once with the instrument; and Ermytrude knew by instinct, as everyone knew who saw her seated at the piano, that she was going to speak in the language which was her own rightful expression, and that her listeners would come immediately under the influence of its magic. She began with one of Brahms's Intermezzi, the one almost like a cradle-song, and then strolled lazily into two or three of his songs, weaving the voice part into the accompaniment, and half humming it to herself too; and after that she passed on to some of Chopin's Etudes, and then plunged into a tremendous *tour de force* of Rubinstein's, finally landing herself in her favourite Nocturne of Chopin's in C minor, which begins thus:—

Lento.



She had ever been at her best in this beautiful Nocturne. She had ever heard echoing to her the strong deep note struck in its stately beginning, its large conception, its reluctant encounter with intricacies, its magnificent blending with them, its triumphant passing on with them—and its

final falling away from them into separation and silence. And to-day she touched depths and heights which she had never reached before, and gave an interpretation which sent a thrill through Margaret, who had heard her play it countless times, and Mrs Bending who was now listening to her for the first time.

She had ceased. Her hands fell gently from the keys. There was a moment of entire silence, that finest homage to beautiful playing. Then Ermytrude rose and stood by Harriet's side. She seemed transformed. She was all eagerness. Her royalty had been swept away into her humanity. Her very voice had lost its artificial clearness.

"You are indeed a magnificent player," she exclaimed enthusiastically. "How can I thank you. You . . ."

"She has won her," thought Margaret, watching Ermytrude put her hand on Harriet's arm.

But in the midst of this critical situation, when so much depended on the atmosphere being free and resilient for the rush of generous emotions, the door was opened with startling violence, and Paul dashed into the room. It was his usual habit to fly precipitately when he encountered any stranger; but on this occasion he did not appear to notice that there was any unknown person in the room. He had never looked worse. His face still bore traces of the severe mental strain of the morning, his appearance was more than ordinarily unkempt, and his hands and apron were stained with varnish of a dark nut-brown colour. He was holding a small three-inch rule in his right hand, but he stuffed it into his apron pocket, and diving into another pocket, brought out a tuning-fork.

"I heard you playing," he said in his quick, excited way. "I thought I'd come down and finish the tuning for you before that strange woman arrived."

Suddenly he realised Mrs Bending's presence. But he did not rush off. He stood quite still for a moment, gathered his courage together, and held out his hand to Ermytrude, a little shyly, perhaps, but deliberately.

"How do you do," he said.

"Mr Paul Stilling, Mrs Bending," Harriet said at the same moment. The tears were in her eyes, and in Margaret's too ; for they both knew that Paul was making a great effort with himself on their behalf ; and the shock caused by his entrance had passed off, leaving only tender concern lest Mrs Bending should in any way slight his overtures of courtesy.

But there was no need for them to be anxious. Ermyntrude always did the right thing ; and even now, although she felt considerably disturbed and mystified by the unexpected introduction of this new and peculiar element, she rose to the requirements of the situation, took Paul's hand, inclined her head graciously, and said :

"How do you do ? We have been enjoying Mrs Rivers's beautiful playing. I was telling her when you came in what a great treat she had given me."

"I don't like the piano," Paul said frowning. "I don't ever listen to the piano. She ought to have played the fiddle instead. The fiddle's the only instrument worth playing."

"Mr Stilling is prejudiced," Harriet put in, thankful for a chance of explaining Paul. "You see he makes violins, splendid violins. No one now living can make a better violin than he can. Ah ! I see you have been busy with your new varnish this morning, Paul."

He took no notice of her, but addressed himself to Mrs Bending with all the eagerness of a child :

"I will show you my last fiddle," he said. "A good piece of work, on the whole, though the neck was a little clumsy."

He rushed off to fetch it. After he had gone, Harriet said, with a wistful little smile on her face :

"He probably won't return, Mrs Bending. He has probably forgotten by this time. You see, he is not quite—not quite normal."

"Alas, no," Ermyntrude said shaking her head piously and preparing to take her leave. She spoke a few pleasant words to Margaret, who had been quite silent since the old sign-post had ruined the situation, and she again thanked Harriet

for her beautiful playing. But although her manner was courteous, there was no warmth in it now, no faint glimmer of that fire of enthusiasm which had leapt up suddenly and had died down in the very moment of its intensity. She had entered the room as royalty, and she passed out of it as royalty. When Harriet and Margaret heard Quong shut the front door after her, they gave simultaneous sighs of relief, and leaned back against the cushions of the sofa. They did not utter a word. At last Harriet rose and moved slowly towards the door. Then she turned.

"The past can never be swept away, Margaret," she said with a hollow ring in her voice.

"Nonsense, don't be absurd," her friend answered sharply.

But she shook her head, and opening the door, disappeared from the scene of the afternoon's grievous disappointment.

Margaret, left to herself, broke off a piece of maidenhair from the plant near her and began to play with it, whistling softly the while. Finally she covered her whole face with her embroidered pocket handkerchief, an act which generally denoted that she had come to the end of herself and everything else in this strange world of entanglements and cross purposes. She must have remained in this condition for nearly half-an-hour, when Paul came running in and called her name. She lifted the handkerchief, and observed at once the anxious expression on his face.

"Margaret," he said, "I've just remembered you said it would be better for Harriet if I didn't come down when that woman was here. And I forgot and came. It didn't matter, did it?"

"No, no," she answered, with a short laugh. "It didn't matter, Paul. Nothing matters."

"Ah, that's all right," he replied in a tone of relief. "I've been worried. You're quite sure? All right for Harriet? All right for Harriet?"

"Yes, Paul," she said. "All right for Harriet."

He nodded and vanished.

CHAPTER X

CAPTAIN BENDING went to Edinburgh to lecture before the Royal Society, and whilst there he received a short note from Ermyntrude telling him that she had visited his friends. It was so characteristic of her to make no comment on them, that he did not feel uneasy at the absence of any enlightening details. He would naturally have been grateful if Ermyntrude had added a few words in praise of the woman he loved. But he knew that she seldom praised ; and he had long ago realised, with a half-hearted sort of laugh, that this subtle withholding of praise, probably quite unconscious on her part, was the reason why her friends and relations had ever sought to win her approbation : the desire for the unattainable being firmly implanted in the human breast. He remembered that his brother Sebert, her husband, who remained her devoted admirer to the end, had once said in a moment of unguardedness : "*Ted, if only Ermyntrude would praise a fellow sometimes.*" That was the only confidence he had ever given, the only sign that his amazing and unfailing service of love went on its uninterrupted course without the encouragement of appreciation.

Well, he had passed away, thinking all the world of Ermyntrude to the last. Bending, summing life up, and now in love himself, believed that his brother was to be envied for having found his happiness in his passionate and chivalrous loyalty to the woman on whom he had set his heart from his early years of manhood onwards. The Captain, scrutinising his own record for the first time, saw that though it probably was not much worse than the ordinary man's ordinary record, yet it contained passages which he regretted, but of which he was not ashamed, passages which he bitterly regretted, and of

which he was ashamed, and passages which nothing in heaven and earth could have made him regret, however importunately remorse might have attempted to press her claims. Passion had had its sway over him ; but the bare fact that he had reached a point in his history when it had lost its unworthy promptings was not to his honest mind a justification for being coward enough to repudiate their past value, even to himself. No, rather he would say : "*And yet those blottings chronicle a life.*"

But that life was over. There was a new life stretching before him ; and with a thrill of joy he greeted it as one seeing the shore in the distance after many and vain searchings for an undiscovered country. He had found it, and it lay in his power to land and take his chance with its possibilities.

In one respect Bending was not an ordinary man. He was not vain. It would never have entered his head that because he had lost his heart to Harriet Rivers, she was necessarily ready and prepared to lose her heart to him, and be willing at his call to join her life to his and pass on with him for the rest of their days. He knew, of course, that she liked him ; but she was by nature so direct and companionable, that her very easiness of manner made him doubtful at first whether he personally had any chance of appealing to her in any special way.

But frequent happy visits to Old Queen Street silenced his doubtings and strengthened his certainties ; and he believed the time was coming nearer when he would have the courage to ask her to pardon his past, and to accept the passionate devotion of his future. He believed that her big generous understanding was capable of infinite kindness and mercifulness, and that her love, once won, would be a shield and buckler, a sword in the hand, a haven, a joyous song, a soft-voiced whisper, a splendid comradeship, full measure of everything and running over. Ah, if she would take him, they two would have days of delight and daring. Not for them the dull routine of everyday life within a narrow compass, but changing scenes and curious conditions, and

the whole world their field for adventure and survey. But he must gather his money together. She was a rich woman, and his pride would not permit that he should go to her empty-handed. It was for this reason, as well as for his own renown's sake, that he wished to finish 'The Voyage of the *Canute*,' and secure the large sums of money agreed upon beforehand by the English and American publisher.

His lectures in America had been brilliant successes, commercially as well as socially. Of course he, like all self-respecting workers, was somewhat embarrassed by the notoriety which America forces as a concomitant of honour on those whom she is worshipping for the passing moment. But he had been frankly delighted to have all the praise, some of the attention, and all the merry dollars. In England, too, he had been and was still lecturing to large audiences, and the Colonies were asking for him, and pressing him to come. This meant that his 'locker' would not be empty; and for the first time in his life he wanted a full locker, in order to satisfy his pride and justify his presumption in paying his addresses to a woman of independent means.

The results of his expedition had been extraordinarily successful, considering the immense difficulties and impossibilities attendant on all Polar adventure; but to him the most wonderful part of the whole undertaking was that Harriet Rivers, a woman after his own heart, the only possible type of life's comrade for his nature and temperament, should have been in Tromsø, waiting on the shore, and crowning the hour of his return with her unknown presence. Even Ermyntrude agreed with him that this was a curious and propitious circumstance. On consideration, he felt sure that when she had seen Harriet, and recognised the type of gallant womanhood to which she belonged, she would be just enough to admit that he had at least found someone pre-eminently fitted to be the wife of an explorer, even if her special characteristics could make no appeal to Ermyntrude personally. Ermyntrude was just. Not always comfortable to deal

with, but just. Her letter was not encouraging, but it was not discouraging. He almost heard her saying to him in her clear, accurate voice: "*Edward, I have seen your acquaintance, Mrs Rivers. She is a beautiful woman. I have heard her play. She is a good musician. I understand from you that she is a great traveller. She gives one the impression of courage and endurance.*" A just acceptance of facts, but no praise. Well, it was something to know that the preliminary visit had already taken place. He would soon visit Ermyntrude, and judge from her manner alone how things had gone. But he was relieved to think that he would be seeing Bess first, and could learn from her exactly how the land lay.

He had come back from Scotland by the night-train and had arranged to meet her that morning at twelve o'clock at Messrs Graham's violin shop in New Bond Street. Bess, who played the violin, owned a fine Guarnerius fiddle; and as she had always longed to possess a Dodd bow, he had promised to give her that coveted treasure if he returned safe and sound from his Polar journey. He was to redeem his promise this morning; and he intended to throw in a jewel too, as a sort of engagement gift, Uncle Ted's ratification of her betrothal to Hughie. So he armed himself with an extra supply of money and started off on his pleasant mission in excellent spirits.

"I wonder what Ermyntrude thought of Miss Tressider," he said to himself. "And what she thought of Ermyntrude. She would not be discomfited by anyone—not she! Harriet perhaps might, but not Miss Tressider—not she! Did Bess manage to spirit away some of her mother's most intellectual books? Did Harriet play? Was Ermyntrude delighted with her playing? Well, well, I shall soon know all the details."

When he arrived at the violin shop, he waited outside, looking at one or two of the fine old instruments in the window. A curiously inlaid viol-da-gamba attracted his attention. He was scanning the printed description and history of it, when Bess ran up and put her arm through his.

"You are a darling not to have failed me, Uncle Ted," she said. "I'm a little late. The motor broke down. Fancy, mother thought you would not be able to spare the time. But I knew better. I say, how spry you look! Off to Mrs Rivers afterwards, I suppose? Heart alive, what a lovely waistcoat! And a new hat, I do believe! The very latest pattern too, like Hughie's. There must be a lot of money in the locker!"

"Yes, there is," he laughed; "enough for the Dodd bow and a jewel of some kind too."

"Splendid!" she answered excitedly. "Come in, Uncle Ted. Don't let's lose a moment."

But he paused on the threshold.

"Hold hard a minute, Bess," he said. "I'm fearfully anxious to know what your mother thinks of Mrs Rivers. What did she say to you when she came back from her visit the other afternoon?"

"Her visit the other day?" Bess repeated in surprise, "Why, I didn't know she'd been. She hasn't told me a single word."

Uncle Ted whistled softly, and looked troubled.

"That's bad," he said, shaking his head.

"Oh no, not necessarily," she replied, trying to encourage him. "You know mother is rather—well—secretive—no, I don't mean that, Uncle Ted—I mean she is—well, she is a little reticent—isn't she?"

"Yes," he answered, so fiercely that Bess laughed outright, and then felt ashamed.

"It is part of dear mother's real dignity," she added, with true penitence.

"Yes," he growled.

"I'm afraid you're dreadfully disappointed that she didn't take me, and that I can tell you nothing about the visit," she said mournfully.

"Yes," he answered a little less sulkily.

"But this much I can tell you, Uncle Ted," she went on. "I paved the way—paved the way from my point of view,

you understand. I hid mother's worst book — Radio-Active Transformations—she's always exceedingly impersonal and impossible when she is reading it. Well, at least she hadn't been studying that subject for several days."

Bending laughed and brightened up.

"I'm sure that was a tremendous help, Bess dear," he said. But come along. Too bad of me to keep you hanging about here. Let's go in and buy the best how to be had this side of the North Pole."

But again he lingered.

"Has your mother seemed her usual self?" he asked. "Not ruffled at all, or anything of that sort? I ask merely because Mrs Rivers and her friend would be an unfamiliar type to her.

"I have noticed nothing different in mother, except that she is rather over-tired," Bess said. "But then she has been keeping very close to a new volume of philosophical essays, Uncle Ted dear; and do you know, I sometimes think—oh, of course it is awful to say it—but I sometimes think all this studying is too much for her brain. I found her asleep the other evening with her book upside down, and looking fearfully exhausted. But don't you tell that to anybody. I haven't even told Hughie."

"But there's nothing shocking in it," Bending said, much amused. "I think it's refreshingly human."

"Yes," Bess said, but you see we haven't ever looked upon mother as human. She has always seemed high, high above us."

"And of course she is," she added with sudden loyalty.

"Yes, of course," Bending answered gravely. And the traditional homage to Ermyntrode thus re established, they passed into the violin-shop of Messrs Graham & Sons. Bess had bought her Guarnerius from this fine old firm, and was personally acquainted with Bernard Graham, one of the brothers now carrying on the business. He was delighted to have this chance of meeting Captain Bending, of whom Bess had often spoken. He at once took them up to his own

private room where some of the most valuable and famous instruments were kept, and gave them the best of himself and his knowledge. Enthusiastic himself and of great charm of manner, he had the power of holding people riveted when he spoke on musical instruments. Bending was deeply interested. He forgot his Ermytrude troubles, and was as pleased as a child to handle the fiddles and to be allowed to strum a few bars of 'In the Gloaming' on the frail little Elizabethan spinet. Bess stood by, holding triumphantly the captured Dodd bow, and laughing lovingly at Uncle Ted's music.

At last they all went downstairs; and whilst they were waiting for the treasure to be packed, Bernard Graham showed Bending some rare old prints and programmes which he had been collecting for many years. Bess was examining a curious and interesting violin case, decorated in poker work with a flowing design of Stradivari sound-holes, when, glancing up suddenly, she saw a man of seedy appearance fumble at the entrance door and slouch into the shop. He wore a brown felt hat slightly on one side, a shabby snuff coloured suit, a flannel shirt and collar, and no tie. There was a charming but mysterious smile on his face. He nodded to the men at the counter, nodded to Bernard Graham, and was escaping quickly to the inner part of the premises, when Graham stepped up to him and put his hand rather kindly on his arm.

"So glad you've turned up, Stilling," he said. "There's an Amati come in from Vienna in an awful state of wreckage. No one will be able to do anything with it except you."

"Too busy thinking about my varnish," he grumbled. "I can't bother about anything else."

"All right," Bernard Graham said smiling indulgently. "As you please. But you will find the Amati on the bench in your room. You may like to have a look at it."

After Paul—for he it was—had disappeared through the door, Graham returned to Bending and Bess.

"There goes a wonderful man," he said enthusiastically. "There isn't another like him in the world, Miss Bending."

He belongs to a bygone age. It is only an accident of circumstance that he lives in this century."

"Do tell me who ^{he} is," Bess said eagerly. "What a strange looking fellow! But what a dear face! And what an inspired expression! Uncle Ted, did you notice him? I'm sure he has all sorts of grand things in his brain."

"He has only one thing in his brain," Graham answered smiling, "but that *is* a grand thing—at least we think it is—fiddle-making. He is a genius at that. Nothing exists for him except that. He really is not quite sane; yet you could'nt call him insane either. But whether he is sane or insane, he was born with this great gift, and his people had the sense to send him to Mirecourt for his training—Mirecourt, you know, is a centre of fiddle-making activity. He was there for years."

"How interesting," Bess put in delightedly. "Do tell us some more about him."

He can make a marvellous fiddle," Graham went on, pleased with her sympathy. "I suppose in the years to come, a Paul Stilling fiddle will be as much appreciated as one of the present old masters. And he can restore the worst wreck of an instrument. There's one waiting for him now, an Amati. He pretends he can't be bothered with it. But I've no doubt he has begun on it already. He could no more resist a sick fiddle than a tender-hearted woman a sick baby. It was he who restored your Guarnerius. Do you remember what a long time we kept it? He wouldn't give it up! Shall we go and visit him in his little workroom? He may be angry, but you needn't be troubled about that. He is quite harmless."

"Yes, yes!" Bess cried excitedly. "You won't mind, will you, Uncle Ted? It's a change for you after only seeing Polar Bears."

"The queer part of it is, that I seem to have seen the man somewhere," Bending said as they followed Bernard Graham. "I can't think where, Bess. But I distinctly remember that curious smile."

Bernard Graham knocked softly at a door on the right of

a little side-passage at the top of the house, and signing to his companions to wait, he opened the door and called out:

"Stilling, forgive me for disturbing you. I've brought a lady and gentleman to see the Amati."

"They can't see it. I'm busy with it," Paul said. "I don't want to be disturbed. Please go away."

"Only for a moment, of course," Graham persisted gently. "You can surely spare it out of your hands for a moment. It's in an awful condition, isn't it? What a crack in the back! Heart-breaking, isn't it? Come in, Miss Bending. Come in, Captain Bending. Stilling, this young lady is the owner of the Guarnerius you restored so splendidly. Don't you remember it? And this is her Uncle, Captain Bending, the Arctic explorer, you know. You would like to show them the Amati, wouldn't you?"

"No," Paul said sulkily. "I shouldn't. Why should I?"

He was bending over his bench at the window, examining the fiddle with a lens; and he took no further notice of his unwelcome visitors. But suddenly to their surprise, he turned round and said:

"Yes, I remember that Guarnerius. The best piece of restoration I ever did."

He came straight to Bess and laid the Amati in her eager hands.

"The other person won't understand anything about it," he said excitedly. "No use talking to him. But you'll know. Look here, that crack of course is fearful. But that is only part of the mischief. The whole back will have to be strengthened with a veneer of new wood. As for the worm-eaten neck, well——"

He broke off, and glanced at Captain Bending who was standing in respectful silence waiting for Graham's signal of departure. Paul's hand went to his forehead. It was obvious that he was trying to think.

"An explorer," he said. "Yes, I've heard something about that sort of person. They've told me. But what they

told me I don't remember. Why, yes, of course, the other day——"

He shook his head, gave up the mental effort as a bad job, turned his back on the intruders, and retired to his bench. Before his visitors had even closed the door, they had ceased to exist for him. The sick Amati claimed him and held him.

Bess was greatly stirred. Tears sprang to her eyes.

"How sad, how pathetic," she said pausing on the way downstairs.

"Sad, pathetic," Bernard Graham repeated with something approaching indignation. Why, Miss Bending, he is the happiest man in the world, and doing the finest work too."

"Ay, ay," sang out Uncle Ted. "And most of us have only flashes of intelligence, Bess."

"And few of us believe in our own work, or are believed in," said Graham eagerly. "He has all that. Moreover he is a genius. Geniuses have to pay their heavy price. But even there he is let off easily. He doesn't know his limitations."

"Oh, but he does," Bess contradicted. "Didn't you see that look of suffering on his face when his memory failed him? It cut me to the heart."

"A moment of pain occasionally against weeks and months and years of joyfulness, probably, Bess, my dear," Uncle Ted said comforting her. "I had a very queer customer of a bos'n on a voyage once. When he wasn't trying to bash in someone's head, he was the happiest man going. And even then he was happier than most people! Cheer up! We've got the best bow this side of the North Pole, and now we'll be off and find the best jewel the other side of the South Pole! Goodbye, Mr Graham. Thank you for all your kindness. Come and see me some time, will you? I can show you a very valuable instrument—priceless, in fact—a concertina!"

CHAPTER XI

ERMYNTRUDE came away from Mrs Rivers's house greatly puzzled and even bewildered by the afternoon's experiences and impressions. She wished that she could have postponed a little dinner she was giving that evening. She scarcely knew how she would be able to concentrate her mind sufficiently to minister to the mental and emotional needs of her guests: a minor poet, Mr Theodore Theodore, who leaned on her for encouragement and appreciation, a new philosopher who had dedicated his subtle and thoughtful essays to her, a painter who sought inspiration from the haunting charm of her spiritual face and sympathy from her instinctive love of art, and an energetic woman engaged in public work, who looked to her for active support in such matters as the better housing of the poor, anti-sweating, feeding of the school children, and woman's suffrage. But Ermyntrude never put off engagements. Her sense of duty did not permit her this luxury. She was one of those happily-constructed human beings, who are under the impression that they are wanted in this world, and never wake up to the consciousness of having been victims of a dire delusion spreading over a life-time. No, she was wanted, and on this evening especially.

So she rested in her bedroom, banished Mrs Rivers's household from her brain, and turned her thoughts in a direction suitable for her evening task. She glanced at the poet's latest book of poems, and noted in a translation from a Greek ode the line:—

"The dear, divine, impenetrable shade."

She committed this to memory. Then she opened, with a resigned sigh, Herbert Spencer's 'First Principles.' She

considered that Spencer prepared her mind for intellectual effort. She turned to the chapter '*The Instability of the Homogeneous.*' She read aloud several times the following passage :—

"The instability of the homogeneous is thus deducible from that primordial truth which underlies our intelligence. One stable homogeneity only is hypothetically possible. If centres of force, absolutely uniform in their powers, were diffused with absolute uniformity through unlimited space, they would remain in equilibrium."

After a few moments devoted to recovery from these severe mental gymnastics, she opened her little notebook and refreshed her mind on the subject of the suffrage for women, the recent policy of the militant party amongst the suffragists, and the political position of women in New Zealand. And she read in the *Times* a critical appreciation of the works of the German painter Kaulbach.

Thus armed and well prepared, she went through the evening in her usual admirable fashion. She looked at her best, in a stately gown of rich heliotrope silk, and, as ever, charmed all her guests by her beautiful presence, her well-chosen remarks, her sympathetic atmosphere and her flattering willingness to listen.

Bess, the picture of health and attractive prettiness listened, as usual, in suitable silence ; but she had plenty to say if anyone had cared to hear her. She had however been submerged for so long in Ermytrude's personality, that when her mother was near, she either had not the courage to put in any claim for individual existence and importance, or she suppressed it as unnatural disloyalty to someone higher than herself, whom she had loved and worshipped all her life. But she had at last begun to realise her position, and chafe under the fetters which bound her down. Uncle Ted was right. Miss Bess was escaping from her prison on the mountain tops. This very evening, for example, when she was safe in her bedroom, and no human ear could hear, she said aloud :

"Another culture party over. Oh, that Mr Theodore

Theodore! How I wish Uncle Ted could go for him! Dear soul of mine, why was there ever such a thing as culture?" And:

"Mother might at least let me have Hughie to myself. She even absorbs him." And:

"Oh, what am I saying—of course it's only right that he should admire her tremendously—I should hate him if he didn't—but——"

And then a few tears brushed indignantly away, and a little brown slipper thrown impatiently to the other end of the room.

Meanwhile Ermyntude had withdrawn to her boudoir. Her mind not having been free, she was tired with the evening's effort, and she had been obliged to strain herself unduly to hear. But she was satisfied that she had given the best of herself to everyone in due rotation, the poet, the philosopher, the public-spirited woman, Hughie, and that dear child Bess who had looked sweet in her new blue dress. She continued to think of her for a few minutes, placidly unconscious, of course, of the silent but active stirrings of rebellion in the green and white bedroom above her head.

"Dear Bess must certainly not be brought in contact with Edward's friends until I have learnt more about them," she said shaking her head gravely.

She took out her journal and made the following notes of the information which she had gleaned from the afternoon's expedition:—

1. Mother comes of naval family.
2. Father, musician of independent means.
3. What were they doing in the Indian Ocean?
4. Who is that strange person, Mr Stilling? He was introduced, but not explained.
5. Obviously a peculiar household. That friend Miss Tressider, undoubtedly a second, nay, a third rate person. And most casual in manner. No breeding.
6. The Chinese servant. A surprising and most unusual member of an ordinary well-regulated English home. Edward had not even mentioned him.

7. And their odd friends, a Madagascar priest, an interpreter, a female merchant in whales. Of course it was all very well for Edward to know these nondescript people—it was his life—his chosen life. But for two ladies to choose this kind of company—well, the thing spoke for itself.

8. Mrs Rivers undoubtedly attractive and a splendid pianist. Possessing no doubt excellent qualities and a warm heart. Obviously the artistic temperament. Not nearly so casual as her friend, but singularly wanting also in—well, what would one call it—innate veneration perhaps . . . singularly wanting in that . . .

Ermyntrude made no entries after this, but leaned back in her chair, thinking things out in her conscientious fashion, trying to hit on some means of learning more about these strangers, and resolving to beg Edward not to propose to Mrs Rivers until he had satisfied himself that she came of a family that was worthy of the bending traditions. Then she examined her engagement list for the morrow, and noted that she had an appointment at 11.30 with her bank manager to settle some changes in her present investments. Her eyes rested on a personal letter which she had received from him in the morning. It was signed *William S. Tressider*.

“Well, that is somewhat curious,” she reflected. “The same name as Mrs Rivers’s friend. Ah, no doubt a coincidence. But I can at least ask him.”

Satisfied that she had fulfilled her duties to the world for that day, and had earned the right to rest her tired brain, Ermyntrude went to bed and slept soundly. As she never dreamed, she awoke in the morning strong and refreshed for another day’s duties. Bess attracted her notice. She thought the dear child looked a little tired, and perhaps a little thin. She resolved to buy a large bottle of Maltine, and some marrow capsules. Bess needed tone. Was it her fancy, but she even seemed just a suspicion fretful. Ermyntrude made a point of going first to the chemist, and having eased her maternal anxiety by ordering several unnecessary medicines, she hastened to the County and Westminster Bank, in Loth-

bury. She was at once shown into the outer room of the manager's private office; and William Tressider appeared almost immediately and welcomed her to the inner sanctuary. He always impressed her as being an eminently reliable person. His tall and rather portly presence, his heavy manner, and his deliberate way of speaking conveyed to her mind a sense of immeasurable repose and relief. No shadows to fight here, no artistic temperament here, thank you. No; plain facts and figures, and bare unemotional statements concerning British and Foreign Railways, Johannesburg Municipals, United States Steel Trust, Borax Consolidated, and other Home Industries.

A visit to the Bank was a great relaxation to Ermytrude's mental powers. It was a real but unrealised holiday to have a quiet consultation with this capable business man, and not to be obliged to strain her ears to hear, or her brains to understand. The truth was that bonds, scrips, transfers and other investment abominations were child's play to her after philosophical essays and Radio-Activite Transformations. If her intellectual admirers could have peeped into her mind, they would have been surprised to see how nimbly her ideas skipped down from the mountain tops to the plains.

After she had transacted her business, she buttoned up her glove and was preparing to go, when she said, smiling:

"Oddly enough I was seeing a lady the other day who has the same name as yourself, Mr Tressider. The coincidence only struck me last night when I was glancing at your letter to make sure of the hour of our appointment. I refer to a Miss Margaret Tressider. She lives in Old Queen Street, Westminster. Any relation to you, I wonder?"

Brother William's face grew stern. An access of severe respectability illumined, or rather dulled his mean little eyes.

"My sister," he answered gravely.

"Indeed," remarked Ermytrude quietly, although her heart leapt within her. "An intelligent and clever woman, I should say."

"Yes," said William stroking his chin. Then he coughed, and added :

"Do you by any chance know her friend, Mrs Rivers ?"

"I have met her once," Ermyntrude said.

William blew his nose pompously and went on :

"I feel it is only fair to myself to tell you that my sister's friendship with Mrs Rivers is a matter of great regret to our family."

Ermyntrude was silent. She seldom asked questions. She had learnt the secret of allowing people to tell her things of their own accord.

William continued :

"But my sister who has travelled a good deal, is of an independent nature and cannot be influenced. She has always preferred to earn her own living. Needless to say I——"

He broke off and smiled deprecatingly, as he spread out his fat hands.

"But that is the right kind of independence," Ermyntrude said ; "and she has probably always been fortified by the certainty of your willing generosity."

"I trust so," answered Brother William piously. "I may here own that I tried in vain to induce her to leave Mrs Rivers. Indeed I took some pains to find a most desirable post for her—perhaps not quite so lucrative as her present one—still, as you know, money is not everything—there are other things in this world except money."

"Yes, indeed," murmured Ermyntrude, closing her eyes, and trying not to think of an increase of income made possible by a favourable change in two investments.

"However, I could not persuade her to go," William added, smiling sadly. "Still, one can only do one's best."

Ermyntrude's self-control again subdued her curiosity. Again she waited.

"You see," William said, shaking his head gravely, "the rumours distressed me."

"Ah yes," Ermyntrude replied vaguely.

But alas, at that moment there was a knock at the door.

A tiresome young clerk with a fair moustache waxed to a finest needle-point came into the room, and handed a card to his manager.

"In a few minutes," William Tressider said.

But Mrs Bending rose immediately and refused to remain another minute longer, declaring that she had already taken up too large a share of Mr Tressider's valuable time.

She would of course have preferred to stay on and hear some details about these rumours; but it flashed through her brain that she had learnt enough for the moment, and that her wisest plan was to see Edward, and leave the matter in his hands. She reflected also that Mr Tressider would be more inclined to be communicative to Edward than to herself.

She walked to the Mansion House and took a third-class ticket on the Underground Railway for St James's Park. Ermyntrode made a point of travelling third-class in London. She believed she owed it to humanity to be interested in the general public. She never suffered the least inconvenience from the overcrowding in the long carriages. No matter how many sufferers were clinging to the straps over-head, or swaying unsupported from side to side, a place was invariably found for the elegant and stately personage who bore herself like the *Empress of all the Russias*.

But to-day, as it was early in the afternoon, there was no overcrowding. She was able to look about and observe, as she thought, keenly. Opposite her sat an able-bodied seaman from H.M.S. *Excellent*. She studied his boyish features and fresh complexion. She noted his parcel done up in a red handkerchief. Her thoughts dwelt for a moment on the Royal Navy, and that much-vexed question of its efficiency or non-efficiency. A workman came in—probably a carpenter. He drew from his pocket a small volume in which he was immediately engrossed. She saw that it was Ruskin's 'Seven Lamps'; and rejoiced afresh that modern conditions made it possible for working people to have their own libraries of art, science, and literature. She decided that the little man at the far end, with a nervous manner and a restless eye, was an

anarchist of the worst type. As a matter of fact, he was a harmless resident in the Garden City of Letchworth, and devoted to the culture of gladioli. But his presence encouraged in her mind interesting reflections on the subject of anarchism versus socialism, and socialism versus republicanism. The masculine-looking woman with the red tie and the severe hat, she unhesitatingly classified as a militant suffragist. She had no means of knowing that this person was the quiet domesticated mother of five sons, for whose welfare she would willingly let the whole world of women 'go hang'; and not knowing this fact, deep meditation on the methods of the militant party set in, only interrupted by the joyous entrance of a beautiful girl daintily dressed in golden brown silk.

"Ah, here we have the true representative of sweet home life," thought Ermyntrude, with one of her unconscious fire-side smiles; and she left the train at the next station, St James's Park, still smiling that smile, and in total ignorance that her 'true representative' was the successful and much loved secretary of the militant party itself!

Thus greatly pleased with her journey, her careful observations and appropriate cogitations, she arrived at Queen Anne's Mansions, and inquired for Captain Bending.

He was in, working with reluctant diligence at the 'Voyage of the *Canute*.' He received her with due traditional respect, mingled perhaps with a little astonishment, as it was not Ermyntrude's usual way of proceeding to take people by surprise. Inaccessible herself, except by appointment, she appeared to regard every one also as entitled to the same privilege; unless it were that she unconsciously considered herself to be of too much importance not to be duly expected and prepared for.

She apologised for her unannounced visit, and after a few sympathetic questions concerning the progress of his book, she told Bending that she had seen his friends, as he knew from her letter, and that she had something of the utmost consequence to say to him.

He bit his lip. He could not take umbrage at her manner. It was most considerate, most diffident.

"Your friend Mrs Rivers is attractive," she said. "I admit that. I should imagine that she has a temperament suitable for your own. But who is she, Edward? Who are her people? What is her origin? You know nothing of her. You yourself have told me she has no relations. And as for her companion, Miss Tressider, it may be that I am old-fashioned, but personally I do not like her. I detect no ladyhood in her. She appears to me a third, a fourth-rate person. And yet her brother, Mr William Tressider, the manager of the County and Westminster Bank, evidently considers, from rumours he has heard, that Mrs Rivers is no suitable friend for his sister. He deplores that she ever engaged his sister as companion. He has tried to induce her to leave this situation."

"And how did you find out that Mr Tressider was her brother?" Bending asked quietly.

Ermyntrude explained. She added:

"The atmosphere had made me uneasy. I had no reason to be uneasy; and yet from the beginning of my visit, I experienced sensations of vague misgiving."

"I suppose John Chinaman gave you a start," Bending said with a half laugh. "I ought to have warned you of Quong—a perfectly harmless individual, by the way."

"He was an unexpected apparition, I own," Ermyntrude returned. "And the presence in the house of that strange half-witted man who makes violins——"

The Captain started. Her sister-in-law noticed this.

"Ah, perhaps you have not seen him," she said. "They have not told you, perhaps."

"You are mistaken, I have seen him twice," Bending answered staunchly. And two visions, one of that rate-collector on the door-step, and the other of that queer fiddle-maker in Graham's shop flashed simultaneously before his mind's eye.

"Then perhaps you can explain him," Ermyntrude said.

"I don't go about the world trying to explain people or

things," he answered roughly. "I leave that to learned folk." He was no match for Ermyntrude. He knew it.

"You are evidently as much in the dark as I am, Edward," she said closing her eyes.

She was silent for a moment, and then she continued, always with the same diffidence:

"Edward, you know enough of me to realise that it is against my natural disposition to interfere in other people's concerns. But this much I must say to you. You have met this stranger, and you love her. But before you propose definitely to her, I beg of you, for the sake of the family traditions and your own renown and position, to make inquiries concerning her. I beg of you to go, for instance, to Mr Tressider. He will probably tell you why he does not wish his sister to remain on as Mrs Rivers's companion. Then you can judge for yourself. This seems little enough to ask of you. May I ask you to promise this much?"

Bending rose abruptly, and banged with his hand on the writing table.

"No, Ermyntrude," he said masterfully. "Certainly not. No detective work for me, thank you. I leave that to you. If Mrs Rivers has anything to tell me, I shall hear it direct from her. And from no one else but her."

His manner intimidated and surprised her. She saw him now for the first time, not as the respectful and docile man who had always been somewhat shy of her, but as the Captain, the leader, to whom her advice, her opinions and her impressions were of no account. Well, she had done her duty. That must suffice.

"I must not detain you," she said gently. "I have told you what was in my mind, and, needless to say, you may always reckon on me. Now I must not keep you any longer from the 'Voyage of the *Canute*.' Good luck to it. Good-bye, Edward, I——"

"Look here, Ermyntrude," he broke in, ashamed of his roughness, and restored to his wonted respectfulness, "you've meant very kindly about this, and I'm grateful to you. I

know you have my real welfare at heart. But let me assure you that you are on the wrong tack. There may be dozens of reasons why your Bank Manager doesn't like his sister to be with Mrs Rivers. Perhaps he's pious. Bank Managers generally are. Then he certainly wouldn't approve of Mrs Rivers, who isn't pious at all, at least not in a Bank Manager's sense. Why, he wouldn't approve of you either, as you are not pious in that sense, are you? And she can't help having no people, can she? If you and I were dead, for instance, Bess would have no people. There you are, you see."

Ermytrude smiled benevolently. She shook the hand held out to her, wasted no words, squandered no emotions, made no comments, and took her departure.

But after she had gone Bending stood in the middle of the room, thinking.

CHAPTER XII

HARRIET was disappointed to the very heart over the unfortunate termination of Mrs Bending's visit. She felt no resentment against the old sign-post who had unconsciously caused the mischief. That was only a chance. 'Time and chance happeneth to all.' Her resentment was against herself. In the long sleepless night which followed the afternoon's disaster she met herself face to face; not for the first time, indeed, for there had been countless of those bitter meetings to which each in his turn is coerced to summon himself; but this meeting proved to be the bitterest of all.

She went over her whole history: her early childhood spent in her father's company: her school days: her life in her guardian's house in Cheshire: her perfectly harmless flirtations, really persisted in to avoid boredom which was the prevailing characteristic of her adopted home: her guardian's determination to get her off his hands: his enthusiastic encouragement of James Blackburn's wooing: her marriage to James Blackburn: her relief in being thus afforded an escape from her guardian's depressing household: her immediate disillusionment in her husband: her growing horror of him: four years of utter loathing: and then her escape from that deteriorating condition to an atmosphere of love, kindness and sympathetic understanding. A return in fact to her own rightful atmosphere, an atmosphere to which her darling father had belonged and her young mother too, and which was therefore her birthright. She had loved Robert Stilling for his own sake; but interwoven with her love was a passionate gratitude for her release from difficulties with which her nature could not cope. She had been the honourable wife of a low beast, and the honoured mistress of a chivalrous

gentleman, and on her knees she had given silent thanks *for her second state*. Robert Stilling and she passed more than a year of the most delightful happiness together in Florence, and then he died. Well, if he had lived, he might possibly have tired of her. But he was not put to that test. Often she recalled his last coherent words to her : 'I wish I could have married you, Harrie !' And : 'I say, dear, keep an eye on poor old Paul, won't you ?'

Looking back, she knew that she could not have acted differently, with her nature and those circumstances. If she had had a different nature, or if the conditions of her life had been more propitious, she would not now be a divorced woman, yearning in one sense to get away from her past, insisting to herself on the indisputable right of every human being to pass on unchallenged, and yet longing for a record which would bear close scrutiny. But the fact remained that she was a divorced woman, through her own actions and by her own choice.

There was no bitterness in Harriet's composition ; and therefore she had no quarrel with Fate, no angry resentment against life. She did not spend her time and thoughts in making out a case for herself. All she said was : "I'll go straight on. I have the right to go straight on. The past is my own, and belongs to no one but me." This was her strong and simple belief, and it upheld her. She never had any doubt about it as a belief ; but as time went on, she began to see that it would not work out as a living force, for the simple reason that the past itself was not content to be the past, but interwove itself insidiously into the present, encouraged always by circumstance and people. When she began to realise this miserable fact, she became disheartened.

But her nature was buoyant. Her attacks of depression and despair were generally followed by outbursts of joyous insouciance and delight in life itself, with its happenings of good or ill. She had also the immense help of a truly sympathetic heart. Margaret was not the only woman whom

she had lifted into a new and happy atmosphere. Women who had taken the same path as herself and who would probably have gone no further—not one step further if they had had money with which to save the remains of their womanhood's honour: many of these women had known Harriet's sisterly kindness expressed in more ways than one. She always said to Margaret: "I too should have drifted in their direction, if I had not had independent means." Margaret's invariable answer was: "*Nonsense, don't be absurd.*" That was her stock phrase when she knew a statement to be undeniable. She had used it this very afternoon after the fiasco of Mrs Bending's visit, when Harriet in the bitterness of her disappointment, had cried out that the past could never be swept away. Harriet heard the kind voice now, pretending to be sharp: "*Nonsense, don't be absurd.*"

As for her own hateful display of temper to her good and faithful Margaret, she did not remember details of what she had said in her ungoverned rage, but she knew that she had been a brute. Margaret might well call her tempers tornadoes. Where had she got them from? She must have inherited them from her mother, certainly not from her father. No, music from him, and tempers from her mother, her young high-spirited mother. She ought to have told Mrs Bending when she was being questioned: "Music from my father, and tornadoes from my mother, I believe."

For she understood now that she had been closely questioned. And why not? It was natural enough that Mrs Bending, anxious for the family honour, should wish to know something about the stranger on whom she had been asked to call. Alas, alas, that she had anything to conceal. That was the whole trouble. It was foreign to her character to conceal anything. Margaret had said that if she had not put in an unwelcome appearance at the right moment, Mrs Bending would undoubtedly have succeeded in worming out Harriet's whole history up to date. That was not quite true, of course; but there was probability in it, simply because of

her natural inaptitude for silence and secrecy. She knew that it would have been ridiculous to go about the world saying: "I am a divorced woman. I left my husband and went off with my lover. I think it is only right every one should know this." Yes, even she, credited by Margaret with a minimum of common sense, even she recognised this much. But when life presented a crisis, a definite situation which had to be dealt with, what then? Silence, and the silently used right to pass on? No, no, not silence for her. Speech, and the frankly claimed right to pass on. That was the only way for her. If Edward Bending loved her with an overwhelming love, he would understand and pardon. But oh, alas for her, that she had anything to tell. But stay. How could she tell him of herself when up to the present there had been no crisis, no definite situation? She knew he loved her; and she loved him—she loved him, she adored him, her heart was set on him, she believed they would be lovers and comrades for all time, she believed she could help him to go on fulfilling his ambitions, she felt sure she had not the temperament to prove a stumbling-block to him in his career. And yet was she so sure? Of her temperament, yes. But what about her history? Ah, there it was. And those words of Browning echoed sadly, warningly, in her ears: "*My wife proved, whether by her fault or mine, that's immaterial, a true stumbling-block.*"

She wept bitterly. Anything but prove a stumbling-block to him. Far better to lose him. And she smiled through her tears. Why, she had not yet won him! He had not yet asked her to be his wife, and here she was talking of losing him before she had even won him, of showing her record to him before she knew for certain whether or not she were entitled to trouble him with it. Yes, but she was entitled. He loved her. One day he would speak his love.

Suddenly it struck her that she ought not to wait for this crisis, that in fairness to him he ought to be shown

his bearings, so that he might choose his direction in accordance with his knowledge. Yes, of course, of course. This had been at the back of her mind all the time, pushed there, kept there by force, sometimes struggling out, imprisoned again and again, but now definitely released. Yes, he must learn his bearings, and she herself would point them out to him. But could she, could she? Was it fair on her? Had she the courage? No, she had not the courage. She must leave the matter to chance. He would learn soon enough. But wouldn't that be worse? Yes, much worse. No, she would tell him herself—and at once. There should be no delay. And when the story was told—what then? Would he understand and forgive? Or would she look up, and see the room empty save for her own loneliness? Oh, not that. That would be too hard to bear—she could not bear that. And she covered her face with her hands, as though to shut out the desolate picture, and wept afresh.

A great, a crying need of comfort came over her. If she had been what is termed religious, she could have knelt down and held communion with the Divine Powers. But Harriet had not the character which turns to the Spiritual for help and consolation: or if she had ever had that special gift, the religious instinct, circumstance had never fostered it in her. She could not therefore seek the mysterious aid of prayer. She sought that which is no less mysterious, and which perhaps, after all, holds the key of the Spiritual for many saddened hearts: she sought music. She crept downstairs to the drawing-room, groped her way to the piano, found it, bent over the finger-board, put her hands almost caressingly on the keys, held down the soft pedal, and began to play, in the darkness and the silence of the night. She improvised at first, in her own dreamy and poetical way, for she was always a true and fine poet at the piano; and after many by-paths of simple and tangled beauty, she wandered into Chopin's lovely Prelude in F sharp major, which opens thus:—

INTERPLAY



She always chose this Prelude when she was troubled. Margaret, awake upstairs, heard the sad sweet strains, which she had learnt to associate with Harriet's saddest mood. She too had been sleepless, and had been reading 'Anna Karenina,' which she now tossed on one side. She threw on her dressing-gown, and snatching up the candle, made her way to the drawing-room door, and waited on the couch outside. The music had ceased for the moment, but she heard sobs, great sobs.

"Poor old girl," she said softly. "She has to pass through devil's times as we all do, and alone."

She still waited. Soon there were no more sobs. Then she rose, opened the door, raised the candle, and saw Harriet huddled close to the piano, her arms spread over the keyboard, her splendid hair loosened and falling over the notes, and her head resting on her clasped hands.

It seemed to Margaret an attitude of entire despair; and yet when she whispered her friend's name and touched her gently on the shoulder, Harriet looked up and showed a face, tear stained, it is true, but not harassed: almost peaceful.

"Margaret," she said in a low voice, "I've made up my mind to tell Edward Bending my history before—before—he—speaks."

CHAPTER XIII

MANY of Dr Edgar's patients began to remark on the curious change which was coming over him, and some of his colleagues called in to remonstrate with him. Rumour had reached them that he was suffering from a severe attack of candour ; and although they themselves, being fine and generous men at heart, were all subject at times to this distressing malady, yet they deemed that the welfare of the profession was seriously menaced, when a mere attack went on long enough to show signs of settling into a condition. One distinguished specialist in particular, Sir James Hereford, made a great sacrifice of time to come and reason with him. Several of Dr Edgar's dismissed patients had in their forlornness sought his aid, and he had gathered from their separate testimonies that his colleague was in a state of mind which needed instant attention.

"I don't want your patients," he said. "I'd far rather not have them. Much better keep them yourself. But if you must get rid of them, let them down easily, without a shock, you know. There are ways of doing these things ; if indeed they have to be done at all. Personally I cannot see that they have to be done. In any case I beg you to think over what I have ventured to say. In these difficult times, when people have become so intelligent and critical, it is necessary for us to keep together as a compact whole. Otherwise we shall perish."

He then dashed off in his sumptuous motor-car, his blatant vanity satisfied that he had made a deep impression on his younger confrère who was foolishly cherishing impossible ideals. He had indeed made an impression.

"Great Powers," Dr Edgar said aloud with a sigh of relief

when the elder man was gone. "And was I travelling along in his direction? I suppose I was. I suppose I should have gone on and on to the bitter end, if some one had not pulled me up."

That morning he decided to be less in a hurry with the people who came to consult him. This meant fewer appointments during the time not given up to operations, and therefore fewer guineas. He had been uneasily conscious for many months that he had been 'rushing' people. He had never intended to do this. The habit was a weed which had intertwined itself with the flowers of his success.

"I can at least put a stop to that," he said, "even if the other things prove beyond my control."

For he had his ups and downs in his desire for regeneration. At his age and with his fundamentally conventional nature, it would not have been possible for him to throw himself headlong into a different atmosphere without glancing back occasionally and with some concern at the calm regions of everyday common-sense, self-interest and accepted codes of thought, motive and action. A part of his mind was saying to him insistently: "Let things be as they are. It is much easier so. Scores of better men than you have been content to do that. The other way means complications and annoyances with which it is not fair that you should have to deal. There are too many other important demands on you, important for other people, as well as yourself. You try your best not to fail in these. In real matters you give the best of your brain and skill. Let other things be as they are."

But another part of his mind was saying: "No, you have recognised definitely that you ought to make a clean sweep of all sham and humbug in your profession. Have the courage of your clearer understanding—and free yourself. Don't let those words heedlessly, perhaps, uttered by Margaret Tressider and yet containing a direct message for you—don't let them die down into silence."

When this thought came to him, he capitulated at once, freed himself resolutely from another fragment of sham, and

allowed himself the secret happiness of believing that Margaret would be glad if she knew. For it was necessary to him, as to most of us, to bring his offering to a shrine: even to a closed shrine. But there are always the sacred precincts, and there is always the threshold of the outer door.

So he brought his offering, and Margaret knew nothing about it. She would indeed have been astonished and amused if she had learnt that she was considered capable of influencing any one in this world, above all a successful London surgeon. She liked Dr Edgar exceedingly, and, as she wrote to Sparrowbird on the evening before the day fixed for Aunt Caroline's visit, she considered him a favourable specimen of his kind, after duly weighing the serious disadvantages of his training and position. But this was as far as she had reached for the moment.

She added: "Do tell him from me, Sparrowbird, that, being down in the dumps, I am positively yearning to see my beloved Aunt to-morrow, and that I do hope nothing short of death itself will prevent him from bringing her to our abode of wickedness. I nearly took a strong dose of strychnine to-day to pull my nerves together, but decided that a strong dose of Aunt Caroline would do the trick much better. Now don't let him fail me. You might impress on him that I never can stand disappointments. I am going to have muffins for afternoon tea. She always disliked them, didn't she? Now you be sensible and go on a riotous spree for two hours. I undertake to detain Aunt Caroline on the warpath for two mortal hours. That will give you ample time to pay your subscription in at the Young Woman's Christian Association, and to have a hasty cup of coffee at your adored A.B.C. shop. Don't lose this golden opportunity, Sparrowbird. It may never come again. Good-bye, and as you value your life, don't forget to tell the Doctor that I cannot stand disappointments. They annoy me."

Sparrowbird smiled lovingly over her favourite's letter, and when the Doctor came, she told him in her meek way that

she hoped he would find Miss Benbow sufficiently well to undertake the expedition to Old Queen Street.

"Miss Tressider will be disappointed if the visit is put off," Sparrowbird said. "She is so looking forward to it."

"Is she?" Dr Edgar said eagerly.

"Yes," Sparrowbird answered. "She says she needs bracing up and that——"

"Yes, yes," put in Dr Edgar encouragingly, knowing well that Sparrowbird's timidity always required bolstering up.

"And that a strong dose of Miss Benbow would—would be better for her than a strong—a strong dose of—strychnine," Miss Sparrow ventured shyly, trying with all her Sparrowhood to be shocked with her heroine.

Dr Edgar laughed.

"Anything else?" he asked gaily, and yet with a faint ring of anxiety in his voice.

"And you were not to fail her," Miss Sparrow added still more shyly, for she thought these were exceedingly bold words of Margaret's, and she wondered how the Doctor would take them. To her surprise he seemed tremendously pleased.

"No, I won't fail her," he said nodding to Sparrowbird, and making for Miss Benbow's room, two stairs at a time. Miss Sparrow looked after him, and there was a gentle flutter in her timid breast.

"He has indeed a noble face," she said to herself. "And he is patient with us all—even with that dear, wayward Margaret."

He came down in a few minutes, gave a favourable report of Miss Benbow's condition and promised to be back in an hour's time to fetch her for this important expedition to Old Queen Street.

"I have never seen Miss Benbow in better form," he said smiling. "No medicine could do it! Wrap her up well, Miss Sparrow, and be extra forbearing till my return. And you must slip out for an hour or two. Do you good. Without the dog, now mind. That's an order, a prescription. Cheeks a little pale. Well, good-bye."

Sparrowbird's cheeks did not remain pale. She blushed and went off to her difficult duties, buoyed up with a secret happiness which lent a fleeting radiance to her faded face and which gave a spring of alertness to her tired step. Never had she been so assiduous and successful in her ministrations to the tyrant. Miss Benbow herself was pleased for once.

"You are becoming quite intelligent," she remarked grimly. "Time enough, too, after fifteen years of stupidity. Still, better late than never. Be sure and take the dog for a run whilst I am away, and give him a good bath afterwards. The hand-glass again. Yes, that new-fangled bonnet suits me. Yes, yes, a very creditable appearance. No horizon perhaps, but a very creditable appearance. Perhaps she will be condescending enough to concede me that. Use the new soap for the dog, and don't be out for more than a quarter of an hour. Now I shall learn the nature of her surroundings. My stick, the gold-headed one. If Mr William calls, tell him to await my return, if indeed I do return. For this journey is a great effort to me. But the family honour demands it of me. Nevertheless it is a great effort to me. She ought not to have made it necessary. And it's winter time. I may be stricken down with pneumonia. If I die, she will be to blame."

"Oh dear, dear, I hope she won't die," Sparrowbird thought despairingly; and after the old lady had been settled comfortably in the brougham, she whispered to Dr Edgar who had returned to the house for his umbrella:

"Oh Dr Edgar, is it safe for her to go—will she get pneumonia—will she die, perhaps? Oh dear, I feel so worried."

"Don't be worried," he said. "I'll take good care of her. No harm can come to her. She's on the warpath, you know. And it's such a mild day. You go out and have some fun. And no dog, mind you. Remember my orders. No dog."

He hurried back to the brougham and drove off with Aunt Caroline, who sat bolt upright, gazing with critical eye at the crowded streets, the motor-cars, motor-omnibuses, the cheer-

ful red taximeters, and all the other innovations of the last five years. For it was fully five years since she had looked out on the world; but whatever her secret feelings of surprise may have been, she made no single sign of astonishment. The motors hissed and fumed around the very windows of her carriage. She appeared not to notice the noise or the smell. Perhaps she had determined to prove to her doctor that the accusation brought against her was a false one, and that she had a horizon, a far-stretching horizon which was not bounded by the walls of her bedroom and boudoir. They passed along the Gray's Inn Road, were blocked several times in Holborn, and witnessed a collision between a bicycle and a motor-omnibus, and a coster cart and a taximeter.

"How careless," observed Aunt Caroline severely. "It ought to be perfectly easy to steer one's way."

They went down Kingsway, and Dr Edgar ventured to remind her that this was a new road since her time.

"I am disappointed to find it is not broader," she said sternly.

"And here we have the New Gaiety," he continued, greatly amused by her attitude.

"Ah yes," she said leniently. "It was wanted. A fine site too."

They turned into the Strand, and arrived at Trafalgar Square.

"Nelson and the lions guarding England as usual," he remarked.

"She needs guarding too," she answered with a return of her severity.

"Last week," he said hoping to shock her, for his own private amusement, "the Women's Social and Political Union held a large suffragist meeting here. They spoke from the base of the column."

"Ah, that reminds me," Aunt Caroline answered. "I must send those brave women a handsome subscription."

He collapsed after this, and remained silent as they progressed through the comparatively unperplexing traffic of

Whitehall, and arrived at Westminster Square. There was a block here, and Aunt Caroline became impatient for the first time during the drive.

"Most annoying," she said imperiously, as though reprimanding Sparrowbird. "It is time we had a regular service of aeroplanes. "These inventors are so dilatory."

By the time they reached Old Queen Street, Dr Edgar was fully convinced that modern life and modern conditions contained nothing to excite wonderment in this remarkable old woman. He resolved to tell Miss Tressider that she had made a mistake in her diagnosis, and that Aunt Caroline was the undoubted possessor of a generous horizon. It did not strike him that even an old woman of eighty could act; and being an ordinary doctor, developed on ordinary West End London lines, it was not to be expected that his equipment of knowledge included a subtle understanding of human character.

"I shall certainly tell Miss Tressider," he laughed to himself. "She doesn't quite do the old lady justice."

Margaret, meanwhile, awaited her visitors with joyful impatience. All her schemings had come off with unusual success; and chance had aided and abetted her generously. For instance, the Bishop of Ely, Harriet's old family friend, had come to London for a few days, and had wired to her to lunch with him at Prince's. Margaret thought that lunching with the Bishop of Ely sounded eminently respectable. Then Paul had been spirited away by Bernard Graham to the workshops in the country. This meant that he could not return until about six. And lastly, the Reverend Gerald Merc of St John's, Whitechapel, and his wife Rosa, had thrown up all their pressing duties in order to come and give Margaret, as she expressed it, the *câchet* of a clerical friendship. They had kept their word and arrived early; and Margaret was hearing all the news of St John's, and giving in exchange an account of the doings in Old Queen Street.

"I wish you could have seen our cultured visitor," she

said. "She would have amused you. I knew she was a quack directly she closed her eyes and talked about the deep joy of being conversant with the language of Homer. Like this!"

"Is it a sign of quack culture to close your eyes when you speak of Homer?" Gerald Mere asked laughing.

"Yes, of course it is," Margaret answered gaily. "You know it as well as I do, Jerry. You must open your eyes wide when you even think of Homer, and the rosy-fingered morn, the mother of dawn, and the much suffering Ulysses. Oh yes, she was a quack, Rosa. No mistake about that. I should have laughed outright at her, if there had not been so much at stake in connection with her visit."

"Why didn't you ask Jerry and me to meet her?" Rosa asked with a twinkle in her eye. "She could have closed her eyes, and Jerry could have recited Homer in his Oxford voice. Then there would have been a pair of them."

"That would have been a treat; but I wanted you too badly for to-day," Margaret replied. "As I wrote to you, I felt that if Aunt Caroline found an outwardly bonâ-fidê clergyman and his bonâ-fidê wife in this establishment, she, being old-fashioned, might possibly conclude that we were respectable. And I believed I dared trust you for once, Jerry, not to arouse any suspicion of big mindedness. If you fail, all is over. Therefore be narrow, or be silent. I don't mind which. But if you must speak, my dear fellow, you couldn't do better than use your Oxford voice. I am so glad Rosa reminded me of that University treasure. I daresay you've almost forgotten it. But it will soon come back when you once begin. Let's hope it won't remain with you. That would be awful, wouldn't it?"

"Awful," Rosa said fervently. "Jerry, I shall have to leave you if that happens."

"Have no fear," Jerry laughed good temperedly. "It is entirely intermittent. It only comes on when one is feeling superior. And one feels less and less superior as the years go on."

"I don't," Margaret returned. "I feel more superior, thank you! Don't you see a great change in me? Don't you think I'm much improved, Rosa? Don't you, Jerry? Where has my bitterness gone to, I should like to know? Tell me that."

"We can't tell you, Madge," they cried together, each holding out a hand to her. She took each hand, and lightly kissed it.

"I never forgot your sermon on 'Bitterness of Spirit,'" she said just a little dreamily. "I don't mind owning to you that it started thoughts in me. And Harriet Rivers did the rest. You ought to preach it in all the congregations. What was the text? Sleep and——"

"It was an epitaph," he answered. "I felt it summed up the whole subject. '*Sleep, and if life was bitter to thee, pardon. If sweet, give thanks.*'"

There was a brief moment of silence, all being arrested by the beauty and significance of these few simple words. Then the door opened, and Quong, ever suave and smiling, announced Miss Benbow and Dr Edgar.

Aunt Caroline, who was perfectly erect in her bearing, and looked uncompromisingly sound in health, saw a lovely room of soft blue and soft green. It gave her the impression of a meadow jewelled with flowers; and in one comprehensive glance her steely old eyes took in all the charming details of the landscape. She saw Margaret becomingly dressed in dove grey, and smiling with childlike innocence; but knew her at once to be alert and ready for the fray. She saw the dark, earnest, rather remarkable face of the clergyman, took note that he was Church of England, that his eyes were bright, that he had a clever mouth and a strong chin, and that the young woman, probably his wife, was small, fair-haired and daintily pretty. She noticed that Mrs Rivers was not in the room, and that the half-witted man who made violins, was also absent from the scene of her intended investigation.

Margaret received her with chastened courtesy, and in-

stalled her in the least comfortable of the easy-chairs. She gave a mischievous little smile of greeting to Dr Edgar, introduced every one in her easy fashion, and left Dr Edgar in charge of Jerry and Rosa who had suddenly realised that he was the surgeon to whose skill, in a recent throat illness, they owed their little girl's life. She sat down near Aunt Caroline, and began to devote herself to her time-honoured enemy. She felt in splendid fighting form. The cloud of depression hovering over her, for the last two or three days, had lifted and left her free.

"I suppose you have found the outside world much changed after your five years of cloistered life," she began.

"I noticed no change of any importance," Aunt Caroline replied.

"Really, how delightful it must be to have such an adaptive disposition. I do congratulate you," Margaret said. "Most people feel the streets to be very noisy nowadays."

"But perhaps they are not," she added reflectively. "Perhaps the society for the suppression of street noises is an unnecessary body. Most societies are, aren't they?"

There was pause, and then she ventured :

"It must have been a great effort for you to leave the shelter of your house and the seclusion of Mecklenburgh Square. And in winter time too."

"Yes, a very great effort," Aunt Caroline said severely, "and it will probably cause my death. But I wished to see your surroundings, Margaret. I owed it to the family honour."

"Well, you see them," Margaret answered cheerfully. "And I hope for your sake that the family honour will be satisfied. We are eminently respectable people, I assure you, although we have a public-house round the corner. Did you notice it? We owe nothing. I paid all the books yesterday. Even the milkman's. And we don't take away any one's character here. Even that clergyman over there would not think of insinuating anything against any one's

character. He is a perfectly harmless person. So is his wife."

"Where is your employer?" asked Aunt Caroline, waving her hand in dismissal of Margaret's remarks. "Does she not care to present herself?"

"Oh dear yes," Margaret answered. "She will be here soon. She would not miss making your acquaintance on any account. I've told her so much about you and William too. She was greatly entertained with William. But then who wouldn't be? He really is a wondrous individual. I wish he would come in this afternoon. But I suppose there is no chance? He alternates between the Bank and Blackheath, doesn't he? Well, Blackheath is the only place for him to live in. He——"

"I intend to speak my mind to your employer," Aunt Caroline interrupted. "It is my duty."

"Ah, that awful word duty. Most people think that duties should be fulfilled at the cost of everything—even of ordinary courtesy," Margaret remarked thoughtfully. "I am not one of that august band. I hope you also are not, for the sake of the family honour."

"You have given me to understand that the family honour is of no importance to you," Aunt Caroline said grimly.

Margaret laughed.

"Ah, I admit you have me there," she answered. And she added instantly:

"Courtesy is really a question of horizon."

Miss Benbow waved her hand again, but this time a little less arbitrarily; for that word 'horizon' disturbed her more than any other word in any language. It pervaded her by day and invaded her by night. And all attempts to free herself from its subtle influence were made in vain. But she was a plucky old fighter, and she did not intend to give her tormentor the satisfaction of knowing that the arrow had touched the target in the centre.

"Where has that woman gone?" she asked. "And where is the half-witted violin maker?"

"I could not tell you where Mr Stilling is at this precise moment," Margaret replied good temperedly. "He is much too busy making violins to waste his time at an afternoon tea-party. He would consider himself quite mad then, you know. And Mrs Rivers is lunching with the Bishop of Ely to-day."

"You appear to have friends amongst the clergy," Aunt Caroline said, glancing at the parson who was deep in talk with Dr Edgar at the other end of the room.

"Yes," answered Margaret piously. "We try our best to help them, poor things. They need it. I have been for a long time interested in the Indigent Bishops' Society. Funds sadly wanted, as ever. That's why I am so glad to have a well-paid post. One could not possibly look after the poor Bishops if one had—Miss Sparrow's salary, for instance."

"You are confounding Bishops with Curates," Aunt Caroline said sternly.

"Of course I am," Margaret returned gaily. "I always do mix them up. Mr Mere is always reproving me. He constantly says: '*Now do remember, Madge, that a Bishop is a Bishop, and a curate is a curate.*'" "You'd think that would be clear enough for me. But the clergy have always bewildered me."

"Fetch your clergyman," Miss Benbow commanded. "I should like to speak with him."

Margaret escaped willingly enough, and sent Gerald Mere over to Aunt Caroline with a whispered injunction to remember the Oxford voice. She herself settled down with Dr Edgar and Rosa, and when Quong appeared with tea, she deputed Rosa to act as hostess, and gave herself up to the enjoyment of the doctor's company.

"I've been skirmishing with your patient," she said mischievously, "but ever mindful of the claims of old age."

He laughed and said:

"I think you are not altogether heartless. I'm prepared to trust you."

"Don't do that," she returned smiling. "For I assure

you that if Aunt Caroline carries out her threat and 'speaks her mind' to Mrs Rivers when she comes, there will be an immediate murder in this peaceful room. All the doctors and parsons in the world won't be able to prevent it."

"We will not allow her a chance of being rude to your friend," Dr Edgar assured her. "But I'm sure she will not even make the attempt. I don't believe she is as hard as you imagine. You don't quite do her justice. And she is a plucky old lady. She sat up in her brougham, erect as a grenadier, and looked out on the world with unastonished eye. Even your Chinaman did not surprise her. She remarked that she had always approved of Chinese Labour! I begin to believe she has an horizon, after all."

"She ought to be grateful to you for your good opinion of her," Margaret said lightly, "and grateful to you for giving up your time on this expedition of inquiry concerning me and my surroundings. You ought to charge an enormous fee. I hope you will. I'm worth it!"

He was tempted to tell her that he had given up his time solely for the pleasure of seeing her, and for the opportunity afforded of learning to know her in her own private life, not as Miss Benbow's niece, but as Margaret Tressider. But he resisted the temptation, smiled at her reference to his fee and kept his own counsel. So Margaret had no idea that this man, this conventional surgeon from Upper Brook Street had been looking forward to this afternoon's visit with an eagerness which all the anxieties attendant on his work could not keep in check. This very morning, for instance, he had performed a specially trying operation. The nurses in the Home to which he sent most of his patients, were astonished by his cheerfulness before the ordeal, and his serenity afterwards. For he was of an unusually sensitive and sympathetic nature, and suffered with his sufferers. He was under the impression that he successfully hid his emotional temperament, and disclosed only a well-balanced character in keeping with his profession. But those who worked with him, read him as an open book and closed it out of loyalty.

Still they whispered at the Home that morning: "The doctor is in splendid form to-day. We never have seen him so happy."

He was happy. He was thoroughly enjoying this little spell of easy companionship with Aunt Caroline's rebellious niece. He laughed at her fun, her random remarks, and the spirit of mischief rampant in her. Yet he knew by instinct that, for all her careless gaiety, she had looked into life, had touched depths, had gone out into the wilderness, and had learnt some of the truths which only the wilderness can teach. He admired also her gratitude and loyalty to Mrs Rivers. For she spoke again of Harriet's unfailing kindness, and said that she never ceased to be thankful for the beneficent chance which brought her old school friend into her life at the right moment.

He asked if Mrs Ermytrude Bending had called.

"She came," Margaret said quaintly, "with all her war-paint of superiority. It was fortunate that, thanks to your warning, I abandoned my beloved Soho, and hurried home to stand by. But we ship-wrecked gloriously, all the same. It was a trying afternoon. You see—well, why shouldn't I tell you—no, I think I won't."

"Don't," he said kindly. "I never did care for details. Moreover, outsiders can often act as splendid barricades."

"A good word," she said nodding her head. "I shall remember it. But you must hear one detail. I discovered that your patient is deaf; ever so slightly deaf. I should imagine that is a dire secret!"

"You must be a keen observer," Dr Edgar remarked.

"Of course I am," she replied as she rose from her seat, and glanced in the direction of Aunt Caroline. "That is the advantage of knocking about. But I must go to your other patient. I don't want her to find out that Gerald Mere isn't narrow. And she will, if she is left with him much longer. Also, he won't be able to keep up his Oxford voice all the time. He's out of practice. Come too, won't you? No need to take Rosa into consideration. She is perfectly happy thinking about her two-year-old little Gerty to whom I have

the honour of being godmother. She is probably writing a sonnet to her. She likes to do that sort of thing here. No leisure down at Whitechapel, you know, and no quiet."

But Dr Edgar lingered with little Mrs Mere, who had put down her pencil and paper and turned to him seeing that he wished to speak with her.

"Does Miss Tressider come to your church?" he asked. "It really would be interesting to know."

"Madge comes and has tea in the church-room sometimes," Rosa answered smiling. "It cheers us up tremendously. And if the club girls seem fearfully down in the dumps, we wire for her. She acts like magic on them. They'd rather see her than any one."

The doctor was silent. But he looked across to Margaret with added interest.

"Sometimes she stops overnight with us and helps with the breakfasts for the factory girls who've come in by the early trains from Walthamstow or Ilford," Rosa continued. "The boot and cigar hands adore her. She might really have been a boot or cigar hand herself. She has been a great many other things, though. She always says she has been everything except a lion tamer."

"That implies a pretty hard record," he said, shaking his head gravely.

"Yes," Rosa returned. "I suppose that is why she is so easy to be with."

"It does not always follow," he answered. "Some become painfully bitter. Not every one emerges from that ordeal with smiling face and kindly heart."

"Well, Madge has emerged," Rosa said warmly, on the defensive for her friend's honour.

"Yes," he said; and he seemed lost in thought.

"And were you really writing a sonnet to your little one," he asked at length, "or was that only part of her chaff?"

"No," Rosa confessed simply, "I was really writing it. I always want to write poetry in this beautiful meadow room, with that sweet view of St James's Park. It is like coming

into the country. It is the country after Whitechapel! And when Mrs Rivers plays—ah, there she is!”

Harriet had not confessed as much, but she had been dreading Aunt Caroline's visit. Mrs Bending's call had taken some of her courage and spirit from her; and she was still suffering from the effects of the deep emotions which had overwhelmed her during that sad night of encounter with herself. She had been lunching with her father's old friend, the Bishop of Ely, who knew her history, and had ever remained her staunch and faithful supporter. When others turned from her, he had stood by, firm as the buttresses of his grand old cathedral.

“Travel, my dear,” he had said, “travel. The world passes on. Pass on too. Lift up your dear head, and pass on too. And God bless you.” Words not very spiritual perhaps in the accepted sense of the word, but human, helpful, and full of inner significance as coming from one who, in action as well as in theory, had ever remembered to place the spiritual before the material.

Harriet, although always sure of his kindness and sympathetic understanding, gave him no confidences to-day, and asked for no advice. Her course was quite clear to her, and she meant to take the earliest opportunity of pointing out to Edward Bending the rocks in his own course. After she left her sweet old Bishop friend, she did not return direct to Old Queen Street, but sought the Abbey, and sat down in Poets' Corner to rest and renew herself. No service was taking place; but the organ was being played by some master hand; and she lingered, deeply affected as ever by music, which was the true expression and the real impulse of her life.

Peace visited and held her. Everything unworthy fell from her spirit, and she passed into communion with the highest and best of which human nature is capable. She was only one of the countless pilgrims through the lengthening centuries, who have come under the mysterious and healing spell of London's grey Abbey, and have found within its precincts, courage for the days yet to be lived through, and a

merciful forgetfulness of, or reconciliation with the sorrows and mistakes of the past. For some long time she was thus held in an unspeakable consolation; until at length her mind returned from the poetry of the soul to the prose of ordinary life. Leaning back in her sheltered corner, gathered indeed into the gloom, she watched the sightseers and worshippers passing to and fro. Her eyes lit on a young woman, obviously American. She was with a man whose back was turned towards Harriet. She seemed deeply interested in Poet's Corner. Harriet heard her say:

"Oh my! To think I should be seeing Ben Jonson's tomb. And Chaucer's. And Browning's. And Dickens's. Well, it does just do things to one."

Harriet smiled. She recognised the well-known American voice of the Western States, and the generous and honest enthusiasm characteristic of West American women. She leaned forward with some curiosity to see the stranger's face; and her own face thus emerged from the shadow. The man did not appear to be sharing his companion's enthusiasm; but he waited patiently enough. Perhaps he had no choice, for the lady was without doubt a masterful sightseer. The fierce way in which she clung on to Baedeker, presupposed a determination which would be thwarted by no one.

But suddenly she lifted her eyes from the book, and turning round, caught sight of Harriet, who, beautifully gowned, and with her splendid figure and noble features, looked an impressive and a regal personage, a type essentially English, and always generously admired by American women.

"My," she said, not inaudibly, "what a beautiful woman! Do look, James! There you have it to perfection. That's the type we Americans admire ever so much. We could never be like that—not if we waited for centuries!"

The man glanced listlessly in the direction indicated, and saw Harriet—his divorced wife. His manner and bearing at once underwent a complete change. He stiffened up, and became rigid, physically and mentally. His voice, when at last he spoke, sounded as though partially arrested by violent rage.

"That woman," he said aloud with biting scorn. "Surely not that street type. You don't know."

He took hold of his wife's arm roughly, and deliberately moved her away to his other side. She looked at him in astonishment, jarred by the grating note in his voice, and shocked by his violent manner. She remonstrated with him indignantly as they passed on together towards the choir. Harriet was left alone to gather up the shreds of her self-respect.

For it was true that this man who had thus humiliated her in the presence of another woman, was James Blackburn, the husband whom she had gladly abandoned, and to be free from whom she was paying her price to the uttermost farthing, still paying it after many years. Instinct had told her it was he, even before he had turned his coarse handsome face towards her. And when he had turned it, and they knew each other, she him, and he her, the strongest emotions in her breast were gratitude for her own escape, no matter at what cost, and sympathy with his new wife who had yet to learn the depths of his low, mean nature. She had ever despised him; and she despised him to-day with all her old intensity, when she heard his words, intended to reach her, laden with contempt and scorn, and saw the import of his action as he removed his wife out of her contaminating reach.

Alas, for the peace-giving and reconciling atmosphere of the grey Abbey. Peace had fled, and spiritual communion with the Highest was broken. An avalanche of bitter and angry feelings rushed over Harriet. She could have risen up and killed him. His words echoed back to her: '*That woman. Surely not that street type. You don't know.*' To be judged by that man, to be classified by him, to be scorned by him, whom she knew, from degrading intimate experience, to be a common brute incapable of fine sentiment and action, and entirely unfit to be trusted with any affectionate woman in any walk in life. *His scorn, his contempt.* They were an outrage—an unbearable outrage. How was she going to

fight with her humiliation? She clenched her hands, and vowed that she would not allow herself to be humbled and depreciated in her own eyes by a creature like that. No, no. She would stay on in the grey Abbey, and wrestle with her indignation. She would not allow her awakened hatred of him to take possession of her. He was not worth her hatred, not worth the havoc of spirit always wrought by bitter hatred. She would refuse to let him have even that much power over her. She would conquer herself, rehabilitate her pride, and pass out with head erect, and with no iron entered into her soul.

But alas, in spite of her defiance, the storm encompassed her on all sides. The waves overwhelmed her. She was tossed, torn—and wrecked.

When at last a great calm set in, a wonderful thing happened. Some one touched her on the arm. She looked up, and to her amazement saw the American woman standing before her.

"You were his first wife, then," the American woman said.

"Yes," Harriet answered.

"I guessed at once who you were when he behaved in that brutal fashion," she went on. "He told me himself who you were; but I knew. And so you had to leave him."

"Yes," Harriet answered in a low voice.

"To have dared to speak of you in that way because you had left him," she said indignantly. "I shall never forget it. Never. I don't understand this English code of chivalry. It shocks me."

"Forget it, my dear," Harriet said gently, "forget it. I am only a stranger to you, and the meeting was only a chance one. Banish it from your mind, and pass happily on your way."

"My home in Texas rises before me," she said dreamily. "Why did I ever leave it?"

Her eyes filled with tears, and the archness of her pretty, piquant face softened into a more sombre setting. Harriet remained silent. The American woman gathered her wandering thoughts together.

"You shouldn't have been so beautiful," she said, with a tender little smile, "and then I should not have noticed you. And you would have been spared the pain and anger, and I also should have been spared the pain and anger. Will you forgive me for coming back to speak to you? I couldn't have left the Abbey without saying one word to you. Will you put your hands in mine as a sign of goodwill and greeting?"

Harriet took the hands held out to her, and pressed them. She was deeply moved.

"Thank you for coming to me, dear," she said simply. "It was a lovely act. And it has healed me. I—I was suffering."

Some words rose to the American's lips; but she checked them.

"Good-bye," she said, with reluctance and regret in her voice and manner.

"Good-bye," Harriet answered smiling gravely. "God bless you."

So once more in the Abbey, and not many steps away from the shrine of the Confessor, the scene of miracles in the past, this great miracle took place, ever recurring and yet ever wonderful, the power of one human being to heal another.

Harriet found her way home half in a dream, lifted above the petty concerns of the moment, detached from the demands of her individual self, and calm with a serenity born of larger vision. She paused outside the drawing-room. She dreaded to go in. But she heard Margaret's voice, and remembered how that faithful friend never failed her in an hour of difficulty. This was an hour of difficulty, caused by herself too. She had no right to isolate herself at such a time. She opened the door and passed in amongst them, but as a spirit rather than as a bodily presence. Malice and criticism, praise and appreciation could not touch her. Even as Adonais, she had, for the moment, 'outsoared the shadow of our night.'

The little community knew it instinctively. They all knew that there was no need to protect her from Aunt Caroline. Nothing would reach her. They gathered round her, because they wished to be near her. They had no fears that she would be wounded by harsh words or ungracious comments.

But no harsh words rose to Aunt Caroline's lips. To her own surprise, all unkind thoughts died down in her heart, and malicious intentions perished in her brain. She too, wicked old reprobate as she was, recognised that Harriet, for the moment at least, was the silent and yet convincing representative of something 'sacred and apart.' She signed to the Doctor that she was ready to go, and turning to Harriet with a smile which for once had no grimness in it, she said:

"You have a beautiful and restful room, my dear. And I am glad to have seen you in it." And she added with a mischievous glance at Margaret:

"I hope my niece looks after you, and does her duty properly. She was always very casual."

"She does far, far more than her duty, I assure you," Harriet answered smiling. "She behaves splendidly to me."

"Ah, I am glad to hear that," Aunt Caroline remarked. "Be sure and keep her up to the mark."

Margaret laughed good temperedly, winked at her friends, and followed Dr Edgar and her aunt into the hall, where Quong was standing with innumerable wraps and a fresh hot water bottle.

"Well, Miss Benbow, I hope you feel none the worse for your expedition," Dr Edgar said as Margaret arranged a sealskin cape over the old lady's shoulders.

"I might just as well have gone on a Polar expedition," Aunt Caroline said. "I have discovered nothing except——"

"You were not meant to discover anything," Margaret interrupted sweetly.

Aunt Caroline glared at her a moment, and continued:

"Except that that woman has the elements of greatness in her. Why I should think this, I do not know. But I think it, and say it."

"Why, Aunt Caroline," Margaret cried delightedly, "I believe you have a horizon after all! Allow me to congratulate you!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE fire of rebellion smouldering for some time in Bess's young heart, had now been fanned into a distinct and lively flame. Ermyntrude's last culture party had wrought the mischief. On that occasion she had out-Ermyntruded herself to such an extent, that Bess felt all the pleasures and possibilities of life, including Hughie, were being swept away ruthlessly from her own horizon.

She decided to make a stand. Hitherto she had ever been most loyal and docile to her mother, and had worshipped with untiring devotion at the shrine set up so many years ago by that adoring husband, who had gone his way and left to others the burden of continuing his unreasonable work. Bess had, so to speak, lit the candles, and renewed the fragrant flowers. The dim and sacred light hanging before the altar had never been allowed to die out. She had knelt piously, in glad but unconscious surrender of self.

But there are limits even to self surrender; and it was natural enough that the utmost extent should prove to be Hughie. Bess had seen many treasures transferred to her mother's shrine. She had even helped to place them there herself, and had thought it was their most fitting reliquary. But when she began to realise that she was being silently called upon to sacrifice Hughie also, her pride and spirit rose up, and fought a pitched battle with her loyalty.

The difficulty was to know what to do. Her mother was so accustomed to being the principal person on every scene, that it was ridiculous to suppose she had any suspicion that she was annexing Hughie. And if she had been told, she would not have believed it. Moreover, who could tell her? Bess knew she could not. At least not yet. She had rallied.

Hughie a little now and then. He had laughed at her, and said she was talking nonsense. His very surprise checked her; for up to the day before the culture party, loyalty would not have permitted her to confess to him, and scarcely to herself, that she had been the witness of many a quiet and subtle engulfment, and looking back now through many years, a belated spectator of her own. No, she could not tell Hughie that. But there was Uncle Ted. Perhaps she might lay the matter before him. Even if he did not understand, he would be a darling about anything which troubled her.

But what was there to lay before him? It was all intangible and vague. And yet real. Still, all she could definitely state would be that Hughie paid great deference to her mother and admired her tremendously. And if he had not done this, she herself would have been up in arms against him. No, there was nothing to tell, and nothing to alter in this respect.

But pacing up and down the floor of the green and white bedroom, one night, it struck Bess suddenly that if she asserted herself in other ways, the difficulty which mattered most to her, would vanish of its own accord. She was twenty-three. It was time that she began to work out her emancipation. What had she been thinking of, in these modern days, too, to delay it so long? Well, it was not too late. She would begin at once. What could she do at once to show her mother by a definite action that she had views of her own, and that she was no longer content to be treated as a young girl emerging from the school-room? Why, of course, of course! Here was a splendid opportunity. She would go and see Mrs Rivers, and then come home and tell her mother. She had no wish to deceive. All she wished, was to begin to claim her rights as a separate individuality.

She had been irritated that her mother had kept her in the dark concerning her visit to Uncle Ted's lady-love. She was all the more aggravated, because Ermytrude had ever tried, quietly but persistently to break up her interest

and delight in dear Uncle Ted. She had tried in vain. Implanted deep in Bess's generous and warm heart was an enthusiastic love for her 'sea-robber of an uncle.' It dated back to her early childhood, when the young dare-devil sailor, home from his voyages, lifted the little girl on his knee, and told her thrilling stories about the wonders of the deep. Sometimes it was his pride to take charge of her for a walk, and when she was tired, to hoist her up on his shoulder, whence she surveyed the world in happy fearlessness.

"What d'you see, bos'n? What d'you see from the crow's nest?" he used to sing out in his cheery voice. And he taught her to answer, "Seals ahead, sir, hundreds of 'em, lying about on the ice as thick as coffee!" Then they would both laugh, she because she was so happy, and he because she was such a jolly little cuss. No, it was not possible to uproot those memories; and Bess's hero had remained a hero, in spite of Ermytrude's subtle endeavours to interpret him as an ordinary and rather unsatisfactory person, unworthy of the Bending traditions.

Bess, turning her plan over in her mind, decided that considering her attachment to uncle Ted, it was only natural she should wish to make friends immediately with the woman he loved. Yes, she would go without fail in the morning. But what about the address? Ah yes. Uncle Ted had told her it was Old Queen Street, Westminster. Now was it 30 or 40? She might verify it in her mother's address book. No, she would not like to do that. Mother's possessions were sacred. She would take her chance and find out for herself. If a Chinaman opened the door, she would know that she had chosen the right house. But ought she really to go? Was she justified in acting without her mother's knowledge? Doubts rose up, which, as the emancipation was in its infancy, might have prevailed for the while, if the thought of Hughie had not choked them down. Yes, yes, she must begin to use her freedom as a modern girl, and thus solve many home problems which had increasingly been perplexing her, but which she had striven to ignore.

At last, with a sigh of relief at the entrancing idea of an escape from bondage, Bess went smiling to sleep. Her mother meanwhile, in the room underneath her, was battling bravely with a new book on political economy, and persuading herself that she had earned the right to this great intellectual treat, since most of that day had been passed in living for others, ministering to their welfare, and making protective plans for her darling child's benefit.

"She is not looking quite well," Ermyintrude reflected, as she closed her book and put it aside, in unconscious but perfect thankfulness to get rid of it. "No, she is not looking well. And she was a little peevish again this evening when Hughie and I were having a pleasant little talk on law matters, and a game of chess. I must buy her another bottle of Maltine to-morrow. Or perhaps some Red Marrow Capsules. Or both. Yes, that would be better. Dear child. She is such a child. I only think of her as a dear schoolroom child of fifteen. I must certainly arrange to keep her away from Mrs Rivers and her nondescript friend."

But in the morning that dear child who was such a child, broke her violin bow and announced her intention of taking it at once to Messrs Graham to have it mended. It was a lovely day, and she walked part of the way through Kensington Gardens, singing as she went, and swinging along with all the grace and ease of happy youthfulness.

She left her bow at Graham's, and did not forget to keep her bright eyes wide open, lest that dear queer man who had interested her so much, might slouch into the shop. There was no sign of him ; and off she pranced to buy some flowers. She was in a state of great exhilaration, and much buoyed up by the feeling that she had begun the process of emancipating herself. She laughed as she stood outside Queen Anne's Mansions. She hoped that Uncle Ted would not heave in sight ; for she was not intending to take him into her confidence. This was her own private spree, which would be spoilt if divulged to human ear. She passed into Queen

Queen Street. To the right she saw 'The Two Chairmen.' To the left Cockpit Steps. She was delighted.

"What a funny old-world street," she said to herself. "What a refreshing change from Melbury Road. I do wonder what mother thought of the public house, 'The Two Chairmen.' I can positively see the sedan chairs waiting outside. Well, now for the house. Shall I try No. 40 first? No, I think I'll make a shot for No. 30."

She pressed the bell at No. 30, and was quite excited when the door was opened by the Chinaman. The ever smiling Quong smiled still more when he saw this pretty young girl with her joyous offering of mimosa and yellow narcissus. No, Mrs. Livers was not at home. Bess looked dreadfully disappointed. Quong could not stand that. He had a whole fund of real human kindness in his Chinese heart.

"You come and wait," he said. "She come soon. I tell her. What you call yourself?"

"Miss Bending," Bess answered, highly amused by him.

"Same name Captain," he said nodding his head. "Same name woman the other day."

"Yes, my mother," she answered, smiling.

He nodded again, and led her into the drawing-room, where he installed her with grave ceremony in the most comfortable chair. He glided out of the room and returned almost immediately with a dainty tray of cake, a glass of milk, and *Punch*. He nodded encouragingly again.

"She come soon," he said. "I tell her. You can lead paper. Vely funny."

Bess, left to herself, decided that this was certainly an adventure. Of course she would have preferred to see Mrs. Rivers at once, and it struck her that, from a society point of view, she ought to have gone away when she learnt from the friendly Chinaman that the lady of the house was not at home. Well, she could not hurry off now. She must wait for a little while.

But she was not destined to have any time to grow restless or regretful; for the door was thrown open rather violently.

and, to her unutterable amazement, the strange-looking man, whom she had hoped to see that very morning at Graham's violin-shop, rushed into the room and knelt on the floor, evidently searching for something.

"Yes, I remember dropping it somewhere in this room," he said aloud, "perhaps near the piano."

Bess leaned forward, and saw something small and shining lying under the right pedal. She jumped up, stooped down, and gave it to him. It was a plane, oval in shape, and of diminutive size.

"Is this what you want?" she asked.

"Ah," he said delightedly, not taking any notice of her. "My favourite little plane. I am glad to have it again. Couldn't get on at all without it."

Then he suddenly realised her presence. He looked at her for a moment. He seemed puzzled. He was trying to 'place' her. Surely she was connected in some way or other with his work. But how? But how? Ah, of course—of course. She was the owner of the Guarnerius which he had restored. His face cleared and shone with one of his radiant smiles.

"Yes," he said eagerly. "I worked at your Guarnerius. It wanted a great deal of care and thought. But I was very happy over it. Terrible crack right across the back. Never saw a worse one. Terrible crack in wings of the f holes. Had to be strengthened with veneer of new wood in lots of places. But it came out well. Very well. One of my best bits of mending. I should like to see it again. I didn't like giving it up. Have you got it with you? I think I will show you my new scroll. And the Nicolas Amati you saw at Graham's the other day. It's all in pieces now, but I'll bring them down. You stay here. Yes, I remember that Guarnerius. I didn't like giving it up. I kept it a long time on purpose. And then they got impatient. They do sometimes. That annoys me. But the Amati——"

He rushed off, leaving Bess in a state of entire bewilderment and delight. Certainly this outing of hers was an adventure. No other name for it, an adventure! How

exciting to see this dear queer man again ! But who could he possibly be ? And what was he doing here ? Uncle Ted had not known him the other day. Perhaps he was a sort of paying guest. Well, it was all very mysterious and interesting, and fitted in splendidly with the emancipation. Bess laughed a gay little laugh. An hour of rebellion was doing her much more good than half a dozen bottles of Maltine. Dear mother, how was she occupied at this moment ? Was she perhaps reading that brain-breaking volume of Political Economy ? And Hughie ? Was he thinking of her, and wondering why she had been so off-handed with him yesterday ? Well, it was his own fault. Why did he always play chess with mother, and talk with her on that everlasting subject of conveyancing ? But how far away he seemed to her. How far away everyone seemed. She had stepped out this one little step on her own account, and the distance had grown as though by magic. And she would never be able to go back that one step. But she did not wish it. Oh, dear no ! This freedom was really glorious ; and there were all sorts of possibilities in it. The unknown. And perhaps the unknown without culture. Dear, dear, wouldn't that be a relief ! Oh, of course she knew that culture was a very precious thing, but . . .

Her thoughts were interrupted by the joyous return of the mysterious man. Now Paul rarely came back when he said he would. Human beings ceased to have any significance for him, when he was once on the threshold of his workshop. But this person was directly connected with his work. She it was to whom that Guarnerius belonged, that Guarnerius on which he had expended so much skill and loving patience. This was the best passport she could have had to his notice. He must certainly do his best for her. He must certainly show her the Nicolas Amati. Wouldn't she be surprised to see it in bits ? He laughed happily, and put all the separate parts tenderly into his apron, and added his own beautiful new scroll to the collection. Then he ran downstairs and dashed into the drawing-room.

"Look here," he said excitedly, beckoning her to come and sit on the sofa with him. "Here it is. This is the Amati. And you see I'm going to strengthen it on the belly—very weak just there. Oh, that will want very careful doing—and I'm not sure I've got the right piece of wood yet—perhaps a bit of that old Swiss châlet from Adelboden might be the best, but I'm not sure, and then such a shaving it has to be—there you see I've strengthened it on the back already—and the rib here is so worm eaten, that I shall have to take that part away and fit in some new bits—here's another weak place on the back—but what a back, and what varnish—look at the arching too—isn't it lovely—and the purfling is perfect, without a tremour—and the scroll—a little stiff perhaps—but very noble—yes, very noble—the neck will have to come off—no good—rotten you see—cut it off there."

"Oh, how dreadful," Bess exclaimed, quite carried away by the man's eagerness and enthusiasm, and her own genuine interest in all he was telling and teaching her.

"Yes, I know it's dreadful," he said tragically. "I feel it when I have to do a thing like that I shall do it at the very last. You see it's rotten through and through. Look here."

So he rambled on and on, an absolutely entrancing companion in his own realm. Bess listened and looked, and in the reality of delight, forgot that she was having an adventure, forgot that she had come to see Mrs Rivers, forgot that this wonderful man was a stranger to her. She had become so absorbed in studying the 'grain' of the Amati back which Paul was explaining to her, and in hearing an excited discourse on gum mastic, dragon's blood and other mysteries of varnish, that she did not know the door had meantime been opened, and that Mrs Rivers was standing spell-bound at the unwonted sight of Paul in intimate and easy companionship with a real human being. Harriet, to her joy, saw his face lit up with the beauty of active intelligence. Nay, it was more than that. It was the beauty of inspira-

"Paul, Paul," she thought. "What is that strange break in your mental continuity? Alas, that we cannot weave the broken ends together with our love."

The maternal in her went out to him. She was unspeakably glad to see him happy and at his very best in brain and bearing. She hated to disturb him, and would fain have stolen from the room, but that Quong had told her a young lady, *same name Captain Bending*, was waiting to see her. That would be Bess, his niece of whom he was so fond. A thrill of happiness passed through Harriet. She advanced to the sofa and said.

"What a shame to interrupt you both when you are so busy! But I can't help myself, can I? I must welcome my little guest to my home"

Bess had sprung up, still holding the Amati 'back.'

"Oh, Mrs Rivers," she exclaimed. "I felt I must come and see you. I do hope you won't think I've taken a liberty. And I've had such a splendid time waiting for you. This gentleman has been showing me the Amati. Isn't it all interesting? I could listen till Doomsday!"

"I'm delighted you've come," Harriet said smiling. "And glad Mr Stilling has been taking care of you in my absence. Yes, isn't it interesting to hear about fiddles? No one can tell you more about them than Mr Stilling. You must ask him to show——"

"I repaired her Guarnerius," Paul interrupted. "The best bit of mending I ever did."

"Ah," replied Harriet, nodding to him. "That would indeed be a bond. Don't go, Paul"

He had gathered up the dismembered Amati, and now held out his hand for the back. The bright look had faded from his face; but there was still a friendly little smile lingering round his mouth.

"The varnish on your Guarnerius was terribly difficult to tone in with," he said shaking his head gravely at Bess. "You just look closely at the lower half of the left side towards the tail end. I remember——"

He broke off, and without further words, disappeared from the room. For a moment both women remained silent, until Bess, drawing a deep breath, exclaimed :

"What a wonderful man, Mrs Rivers !"

"Yes, he is wonderful," Harriet answered, delighted to hear Paul praised. "And you are evidently able to appreciate him, being yourself fond of fiddles."

"Yes," Bess answered eagerly, "but it isn't only that. It's more than that. It's being with someone who is the real thing, you know—not an attempt at a thing—not a pose at a thing—not a pretence, conscious or unconscious—but the real thing. How it stirs one, doesn't it? The real thing, like dear Uncle Ted. He's real, isn't he?"

"Yes, yes," Harriet answered, her face lighting up at once.

"Oh, I've been longing to see you," Bess cried. "He has told me such a lot about you. He wanted me to come with mother. But she—she often makes her calls alone. And I couldn't wait any longer."

Harriet took the girl's face and kissed it.

"It was lovely of you to come, dear," she said, "and you are as welcome as the flowers in Spring. And I suppose these flowers are for me. I am sure they are. No one else shall have them if I can help it! I will put them in this large vase for the present. And you must take off your hat and stay to lunch. What a pretty hat! Clever little girl! You know what suits you, don't you?"

"Uncle Ted chose it and paid for it," Bess said triumphantly.

"How clever of him!" Harriet said gaily. "Fancy knowing about hats as well as Arctic regions! That is indeed comprehensive knowledge! But let me look at you well. Yes, you're like him. Wonderfully like him. And just a touch of the same reckless little air too"

She laughed delightedly. She was happy beyond all telling to have Bess with her, and to find her human and reachable. There had been wide worlds between herself

and Ermyntrude, vast deserts which could never be traversed. But she knew by instinct that there were no inhospitable tracts between herself and this little niece whom Uncle Ted loved; and the chill of Ermyntrude's visit was forgotten in the glow of this unexpected and spontaneous overture from Bess herself. All Harriet's troubles passed from her mind. She remembered only that she loved this man with her whole heart, and that Bess, who belonged to him and was very dear to him, had sought her out of her own free will and seemed to think it was only natural to wish to be in her company.

"You see I had to come," Bess said as she helped to arrange the flowers. "Uncle Ted means so much to me, that I could not go on any longer without getting to know you. Oh, he does love you, Mrs Rivers! And he is such a dear. You do love him, don't you? Yes, I'm sure you do. If you didn't, you wouldn't have that look on your face. You should hear how he speaks of you. May I tell you some of the things?"

"Yes, yes, dear," Harriet answered impulsively.

"Well, he says you are very beautiful," Bess began. "And indeed you are."

"No, not that," Harriet laughed.

"And with shining eyes far apart from each other," Bess continued. "He was very particular about that."

"And are they?" Harriet asked playfully.

"Yes," Bess went on eagerly. "And he says he could imagine you as a warlike queen riding forth at the head of your warriors. And that you'd be splendid to cross a desert with, and grand in a shipwreck. And fine on an ice floe. And that you are built on big lines. Nothing petty about you."

Harriet covered her face with her hands for a moment. Then she looked up, and smiled.

"The only thing that is true," she said, "is, that I should probably behave well in a shipwreck."

"Well, what more could a sailor possibly want!" Bess

replied quaintly; and they laughed and went in to lunch hand in hand when Quong summoned them. Bess often remembered that lunch afterwards: fried sole and a delicious roast fowl, grated chestnuts and cream, and a cheese soufflé, cooked to perfection: Sparkling Moselle and the ever smiling Quong all important items, but the most important being the easy intercourse and interchange, without strain, and without the effort of having to live up to something vaguely but exactly wonderful. It was a delightful time, and helped on the emancipation in a marvellous fashion. The mysterious man rushed in too, munching a banana. He brought his beautiful scroll.

"Here's my new scroll," he said excitedly to Bess. "It's going to be a great improvement on my last. A glorious piece of maple from Herzegovina. Look at it—no—you can see it upstairs"

And he rushed away as before.

"That is an invitation to his workshop," Harriet said. "We will go there later"

She did not attempt to explain Paul, and indeed there was no necessity. Bess was ready to take any person and any circumstance for granted in these new and congenial surroundings, where Uncle Ted had his place of honour, and where she felt able to talk unreservedly of him to one who cared to listen. There was no disparaging tone towards him here: no editing of him, no curtailing of him, no accepting of him patiently because he had done great deeds and won great honours. No. Here in Old Queen Street was love for him, and wholehearted admiration and enthusiasm. Could it then be wondered at that these two women, each loving him in her own way, with two different kinds of love not hostile to each other, should draw together and feel the happiness of close communion? Harriet learnt from Bess some of his brave acts as a young man, as a boy even, and her heart swelled with pride and pleasure.

"Ah," she said, with the light of love shining in her eyes, "you should have heard what they said of him at Tromso."

"How I wish I could have been there!" Bess exclaimed. "I was longing to go, but mother could not undertake the journey. She is a bad sailor."

"I hope your mother will not be worrying about you," Harriet said, suddenly remembering Mrs Ermyntrude's existence. "She will understand that you are with me?"

"Oh yes, that will be quite all right," Bess answered, checking her impulse to tell Mrs Rivers that she had come without her mother's knowledge

And it was not difficult to be silent on that subject, for dear mother still seemed far away and for the moment did not count. As for poor Hughie, his name had not once crossed her lips, because the thought of him had not once entered her mind. He would return and take his place later on, no doubt, but meantime Bess was being claimed by new and stirring interests to which he himself had unconsciously led her. But for him, she might have been at her time-honoured task of placing flowers on her mother's altar, instead of enjoying in Mrs Rivers's house these pleasant hours of freedom of spirit and action. Even Harriet's music spoke to her of freedom. It thrilled through her. She heard the true call of a great artist, arresting, compelling: 'the real thing,' not a conscious or unconscious pretence. She was carried off her feet, lifted up on wings, sped along over snow-capped mountains. And when the last sounds of Schumann's Pianoforte Concerto died away, and the spell ceased, she ran to Harriet's side. The tears were streaming down her cheeks, and her voice was trembling with excitement as she cried:

"Mrs Rivers, who are you and what are you? Oh, you're wonderful! You should be playing to thousands of people. You would hold them all."

Harriet kissed the eager, tear stained face

"No, no, dear," she said shaking her head. "I have the secret. I know that. But the secret is no good, in these days, without years of accumulated toil. And the toil is no

good without the secret. But if I were young like you, wouldn't I go ahead!"

"Why didn't you?" Bess asked almost reproachfully. "Oh, why didn't you? What were you doing?"

"I lost my way," Harriet answered simply; and she bent over the piano and began to weave sad thoughts into a sad melody. But mercifully Margaret arrived, evidently in excellent spirits. Harriet forgot to be miserable, and at once strummed the melody of the 'Yo ho' song from 'The Flying Dutchman,' altering the words to the following:—

"Here's Margaret, Yo ho! Yo ho!

She's prowled around in old Soho!"

"Yes, you're quite right," Margaret laughed, greeting the girl and wondering who she was. "I have been in Soho to day, Harriet. In some of my old haunts. I had a long talk with my best friend in the world, the ironware man in the market. And then I went on to my Polish photographer, and I helped to photograph an Archdeacon in gaiters, a lady in tights, three lamb-looking people who want to abolish the censor, and a Revivalist Preacher in a trance, a sort of trance, you know. Anyway, he gazed at me and saw nothing. Like this. Very easy to photograph that kind of expression, because it isn't an expression. Not a bad thing if all sitters were Revivalist Preachers in trances. What a world it would be, though! Ah, I know who you are, my dear. You're Miss Bess Bending."

"And you are Miss Tressider, I'm sure," Bess said laughing.

"Well, considering you heard my name in the song, I don't think you've shown so much intelligence as I have," Margaret answered brightly. "But then I am very remarkably intelligent!"

"I'm certain you are," Bess answered. "But so is Mrs Rivers, apparently. How did she know you'd been in Soho?"

"Oh, that's easy enough," Harriet put in. "Margaret

always has a look of rapture on her face when she has been wandering about in Soho. She'd love to live in the Italian Colony."

"No, not now," said Margaret "Those days are past. Old Queen Street is good enough for me. What do you think of our street, I wonder? Isn't it quaint at the back, and beautiful in the front?"

"It's delightful," Bess answered enthusiastically "And oh, I've been having such a happy time Mrs Rivers has been so good to me And that wonderful genius—that fiddle-maker—I can't forget him "

"Goodness!" thought Margaret "She has seen the old sign-post I ought not to be out of this house a single minute."

"Yes, fancy," exclaimed Harriet joyously "I found Paul and this dear child together in the happiest comradeship. He was showing her the Amati It appears he repaired her Guarnerius "

"Well, that's amazing too," remarked Margaret "But how did he know it was yours?"

"They told him at Graham's violin shop, when Uncle Ted and I were buying a bow," Bess said "We saw him "

"How curious," Margaret remarked thoughtfully "The only place he ever goes to "

"Yes, isn't it?" returned Harriet "And then to see him here again—and at his very best, Margaret "

Margaret glanced at her, and said to herself

"Goodness, what a duffer you are, Harriet. You have about as much circumspection as a new born babe. Less "

"At his very best," Harriet repeated proudly "Eager, inspired, kind and enthusiastic And that reminds me He has actually asked us up to the workshop. Perhaps we ought to go now."

"He has forgotten," Margaret said. "I met him out a few minutes ago He was going off to the Flagstaff at Hampstead to see the sunset. Needless to say he has

"Ah, well, some other time, dear," Harriet said turning to Bess. "For you will come soon again, won't you? You must ask your mother to spare you very soon."

"Yes," Bess answered a little guiltily; and something in her voice and the expression of her face made the ever observant Margaret jump to the conclusion that Mrs Ermyntrude Bending was in blissful ignorance of her daughter's visit. She determined to walk a little way with Miss Bess and find out. She knew that this possibility would not have occurred to Harriet, whom she sometimes considered to be as half witted as the old sign-post himself.

No, the highly moral Mrs Ermyntrude Bending would never have sent her daughter to people whom she no doubt considered nondescript. No, Miss Bess had given her mother the slip, and come to see for herself. Margaret laughed softly. A rebel herself ever since she could remember, she sympathised with every form of rebellion.

"You are not at all like your mother, my dear," she said watching the girl pin on her pretty hat.

"No, she is the image of her uncle, the very image!" Harriet cried impulsively. "The same forehead, the same eyes with a twinkle in them, and absolutely the same nose. Look, Margaret."

"I never remember anyone's nose except Brother William's," Margaret returned teasingly. "It's square and roomy, contrived for pompous blowing at the County and Westminster Bank and elsewhere. But I do see the twinkle in the eyes, and a dormant recklessness. I say, what a pretty hat!"

"Captain Bending chose it," Harriet said. "Think of that."

"Then I'll let him choose my next," Margaret exclaimed gaily.

"I shall tell Uncle Ted," Bess laughed. "Oh, I wish I had not to go. I've been so happy. I've——"

She broke off, and gave a great sigh of contentment.

"I've felt so gloriously free," she said. "You can't

imagine what that alone has meant to me. The very street smiled to me. 'The Two Chairmen!' Cockpit Steps! Then the Chinaman. And this sweet room. My splendid talk with that wonderful man. And my happiness with you, Mrs Rivers. And then with both of you, in your dear atmosphere. And that beautiful music of hers, Miss Tressider. She ought to be playing to thousands of people in the Queen's Hall and the Albert Hall—and every where, oughtn't she? Can't you hear them clapping her and shouting for her? I can. I can see them standing up and waving their programmes."

"Yes, I can," Margaret said gently, touched by the girl's appreciation.

"And Uncle Ted can," Bess said triumphantly.

"Can he?" Harriet asked flushing with pleasure.

"Yes," Bess answered. "He has said it over and over again. And lots of other lovely things too."

"And nothing true, except that I should probably behave well in a shipwreck," Harriet said a little wistfully.

"And perhaps you wouldn't even do that," Margaret suggested. "I shouldn't, I'm sure. I should want to be saved before the babies and the Revivalist Preachers."

"Don't you believe her," Harriet laughed. "I've seen her in a fire."

"Nonsense," retorted Margaret. "She wants to put you against me, Miss Bess. She wants to make me out a heroine. I won't be a heroine. And besides, a fire is not a shipwreck, is it?"

"What did you do in the fire?" Bess asked coaxingly. "Do tell me, Miss Tressider."

"I saved a five-pound note, and an astrachan muff," Margaret answered, stroking the girl's cheek. "The only five-pound note I ever saved in my life!"

"I'll tell you about the fire some day when you come again," Harriet said. "Be sure and come very soon. Bring your Guarnerius. We'll play together, you and I. Shall we? And Paul will love to see that fiddle again. He couldn't

bear giving it up. How curious that it should have been yours! Weeks and weeks he kept it by him, long after he had finished working on it. And at last Mr Bernard Graham begged us to steal it from him. Do you remember, Margaret? We crept into his workshop in the dead of night."

"Yes," answered Margaret, "it was a moonlight night and all the fiddles, tools and varnish bottles made a point of staring at us. Not being a heroine, I was quite nervous. No, don't bring that Guarnerius back, Miss Bess. I couldn't undertake to commit a second burglary in the same premises."

"If I'd known, I would willingly have gone on being patient," Bess exclaimed, her thoughts turning back gladly to that mysterious man who had begun the day's pleasure for her.

"Patience is a deplorable quality," Margaret said cheerily. "Don't cultivate it too much at your time of life. I'll see her on her way, Harriet. My turn now. You've had your innings. She must really learn that I too am quite a remarkable person, though I don't choose to make violins or play on the piano, or even explore the Polar regions. You may come as far as the front door, but no further."

They went into the hall, where Quong, springing up from some mysterious corner, awaited them with his usual friendly smile and quiet proprietary manner. Bess glanced at him with renewed interest, gazed around her as though filling her mind's eye with memories, turned once more to Harriet to receive a parting caress, and passed regretfully out of the house which had been to her a veritable fairyland. If fairyland means an enchanted region where dim and vague visions become realities.

Harriet returned to the drawing room. Quong had lit the electric lamps, but she switched them off. He had drawn the curtains, but she pulled them apart, and stood by the great window watching the beautiful picture of the bare branches in the evening light. Then she pushed her chair close to the glowing red fire. She was excited and elated. This child's unexpected visit had filled her with joyfulness. Bess's young generous enthusiasm, her impulse of ready affection, and

trust, her ardent pride in Uncle Ted who had ever been a hero to her: all this made an appeal to Harriet which was not merely emotional, but mental. They spoke, in fact, the same language. There was no painful delving for meaning. And added to the happiness of a direct personal understanding with some one who belonged to the Captain and whom he loved, there was the unspeakable delight of learning that he had opened his heart to this child, and told her his secret. Harriet laughed for very joy. What was it he had said? Shining eyes, far apart, a warlike Queen riding forth at the head of her army, splendid to cross a desert with, fine in a shipwreck, built on big lines—oh dear—how she wished she were—but whether true or not, it was glorious to hear, for it meant—yes, it meant that he loved her and that he had known instinctively that she was his true mate—yes—splendid to cross a desert with—fine in a shipwreck. The tears stole down her cheeks. He, the gallant sailor thought that of her—and loved her. She drew still nearer to the fire, and saw pictures in it. Her face was wet with tears now. She forgot everything in life, except that Edward loved her and believed her to be endowed with those special qualities which his own dauntless spirit would most appreciate and prize. She laughed and smiled through her tears. Mountains, deserts, shipwrecks, icefloes—yes, yes, she was ready for them all!

She did not hear the door open. She did not know that anyone had come into the room, until she looked up and found Edward Bending standing by her side. He saw the tears streaming down her face. Full of concern, he knelt down and took her hands.

“Harriet,” he cried—and it was the first time he had called her by that name—“Harriet—you are in trouble—I must know—yes, I must know—I want to share your sorrow with you—whatever it is—I’ve come to ask you to share all my troubles with me and all my happiness too—speak to me, darling—what is it—what is it?”

Faster than ever fell the tears now. The broken words came almost in a whisper:

"Only crying from joy—little Bess has been to see me—shining eyes far apart—warlike Queen—splendid to cross a desert with—grand on an icefloe—fine in a shipwreck—nothing true—but lovely to hear—Edward——"

"My darling," he cried with passionate joyousness, and gathered her to his breast.

But as she rested there, forgetful of everything save this man's love for her and her love for him, Paul, who had suddenly remembered that he had not shown his scroll to his new friend, abandoned his outing to Hampstead, returned to the house, rushed up to his workshop, and snatching hold of the fiddle-head, ran downstairs waving it excitedly. He was turning the door handle of the drawing-room, when the ever watchful Quong rose up from nowhere and touched him on the arm.

"Young woman gone," he said shaking his head authoritatively. "You too late. Mrs Livers there. Captain Bending there. You and I not going in. Better for Mrs Livers not disturb her."

Paul stood a moment thinking painfully. Margaret's words stole back to his fitful memory: "*Better for Harriet.*"

"Better for Harriet," he repeated, putting his hand up to his head. "Captain Bending . . . better . . ."

He went slowly upstairs again.

CHAPTER XV

IT was nearly seven o'clock when Bess reached her home in Melbury Road. Margaret, always restless for the river, had suggested that they should stroll across Westminster Bridge and see from there the lingering traces of a beautiful sunset. So they stood and watched the gathering darkness, the soft blue grey colour of the sky heralding a moonlight night, and the lights of the great city reflected in the water and piercing the distance. The bridges right and left of them were studded with shining jewels—diamonds, emeralds, and rubies. The river claimed some of this radiance, and the clouds of smoke from the trains dashing to their destinations, borrowed a passing iridescence.

Margaret loved London, and knew the heart of it. To her the roar of the traffic and the increasing movement had ever been strong antidotes to the dullness of circumstance which in former years had persistently pervaded her life. She told Bess how in the old days she used to escape from her routine duties as governess to a particularly stupid Greek girl, and roam about the most crowded streets in the City and the East End, eagerly taking in every incident and detail to interest and stimulate her.

"When I wished to feel Continental, I haunted Soho, and when I wanted to be soothed, I came to Westminster Bridge," she said. "Often, when I was out in the great world, I've stood here in spirit, and seen with my mind's eye the lights of the Houses of Parliament and St Thomas's Hospital curtseying to each other from their opposite banks of the river. At the time, I've been thousands of miles away, perhaps; and yet I've always been comforted with the vision I'll tell you a secret, my dear. I worked on Mrs Rivers's

feelings and made her come to live in Westminster. She would probably have gone to Kensington. But I was stern, inexorable. I wanted the Abbey, Big Ben, the River, the Embankment, the Bridges, the Tate Gallery and St James's Park. And I've got them all! Wasn't it clever of me, and good of her? For I think she had set her heart on Campden Hill. But she's quite cured now, and loves this part as much as I do. Well, I hope I shall die here, and be buried amongst the statesmen in the Abbey."

Bess laughed. She was exceedingly happy, and increasingly delighted with her new companion. Oh, oh, oh, how splendid it was to have passed a whole merry day outside the pale of culture, and to finish up with this extra bit of enjoyment with Miss Tressider. What a nuisance to go back to Kensington! Certainly there was something in Kensington which weighed on the spirit. Westminster made one feel quite a different human being, so gay, light-hearted, and gloriously free. All the same, it was time to go home to Melbury Road. But there still remained on the programme arranged by Margaret, a good little spin to Trafalgar Square where a motor omnibus would be found willing, if not able, to thud thunderingly in the direction of the Royal Borough.

They retraced their steps over the Bridge, and passed down Whitehall, Margaret completely charming Bess with her lively ways and amusing remarks. For Margaret had decided that it would be unfair to probe the girl who was enjoying herself to her heart's content and should therefore be exempt from the keen edge of selfish enquiry. Of course she dearly desired to know whether Ermytrude had sanctioned her daughter's visit; and she longed to suggest to Bess, in some indirect way, that reticence on the subject of Paul might be both advisable and beneficial all round. But her sense of fair play forbade; her own dignity also urged her to forbear.

"Good Heavens," she thought. "And I didn't know I had any dignity. Perhaps it isn't mine! Perhaps it's Harriet's. Ah, that's what it is!"

So they arrived at Trafalgar Square, having had a merry walk and talk free from all questions and answers. They did not once refer to Ermyntrude. But they did touch on the dangerous subject of culture. Bess seemed bent on learning Margaret's opinion about cultured people. Margaret was equally bent on withholding her opinion, and spoke in vague terms about the joys of the mind and the gymnastics of the brain. She thought this sounded very well, and meant nothing. Anyway it did not compromise herself, Mrs Ermyntrude Bending, or any one else living a cultured life in Kensington.

"Culture isn't everything," Bess stated with the enthusiasm of some one who has just discovered a mighty truth.

"Perhaps not," remarked Margaret with admirable meekness.

"Besides," continued Bess with increased fervour, "there is something infinitely greater—genius, the inborn thing. The real thing, you know, Miss Tressider. Now that wonderful fiddle-maker, for instance. He has it—hasn't he? Do tell me who he is? I long to know more about him. I've been meaning to ask ever so many times, but there has been so much to talk about, hasn't there?"

But at that moment the right motor-omnibus dashed up, and the next moment thudded recklessly away, having allowed no opportunity for statements or misstatements. Margaret stood on the edge of the Square, waving to Bess and congratulating herself that she had not been obliged to say that the wonderful man was her long-lost relation—perhaps a long-lost brother from Queensland or Timbuctoo.

"I am glad I had not the chance of saying anything untrue to that dear girl," she thought as she bought a *Pall Mall Gazette* from a cheery one-legged newspaper boy. "Moreover I could not put anyone in Brother William's place. He is too unutterably precious."

She strolled homewards, lingering as she went, whilst Bess was whirled to Kensington, and finally arrived at Melbury Road. Bess thought that the road looked singularly

uninteresting, and the hall strangely depressing, and that Elizabeth, the superior parlour-maid, who had always lived in the best Kensington families, presented a dull appearance as compared with that of the smiling Chinaman in the Westminster household. She asked whether her mother was alone, and learnt that Mr Theodore Theodore was in the drawing-room. She nodded, and passed up to her green-and-white bedroom. She was not feeling inclined to meet that affected young verse-maker, who regarded himself as the new Swinburne of English literature. Dear mother's patience with him was angelic. Or was it patience? Bess stood still. A flood of new ideas rushed over her. Was it want of perception? Oh no, surely not—and yet when she began to think of the people who formed dear mother's circle, she could not help wondering whether—oh, it was horrid disloyalty—she knew that—whether dear mother really did recognise the difference between the real thing and the sham thing. Now that wonderful man who had repaired the Guarnerius—ah, there was the Guarnerius. She must at once examine it, and find out the traces of his devoted workmanship.

She took the Guarnerius tenderly out of its case, and scrutinised it under the electric light. Yes, there was a tiny piece put in there, and a most dainty strip inserted in the lower half of the left rib near the tail end, as he had said. Yes, yes, and he had been at work in several places on the back, and here too on the belly. But she would not have known if he had not told her; for he had matched the grain of the wood and the varnish with almost magical exactness. Well, she had valued her Guarnerius always, but now it had taken on an added meaning and worth, for she would ever remember that this mysterious stranger had given to it the best of his healing skill and enthusiastic care.

As she stood turning it over from side to side, Ermyntrode came into the room. Then and then only, Bess realised that she had a situation to face, that she had to give an

account of herself, and an explanation of her long absence. But she was still in such a rapt state of elation over this day of happy freedom, that she was quite unconcerned and fearless. Dear mother was there and had to be told. That was all.

"Mother," she said, replacing the fiddle in its case. "I should have come into the drawing-room to you, but Elizabeth told me Mr Theodore Theodore was with you. And I can't stand him. It's no use. He is such an affected ass. I don't know how you can endure him."

If Bess's eyes could have noticed anything at that moment, she would have observed that Ermyntrude turned pale from amazement; for this was the first time that the august lady had ever known her judgment to be challenged, her correct taste criticised. She was so surprised that she remained silent, wondering vaguely whether her troublesome middle ear had played her false. But there were more surprises in store for her. Bess proceeded at once to explain her long absence, but without preliminaries of any kind, and without excuses.

"I have been spending the whole day with Mrs Rivers," she said quite simply.

"With Mrs Rivers?" Ermyntrude repeated aghast.

"Yes, mother," Bess replied. "You see, I wanted dreadfully to know her, and as you did not take me with you when you went to call on her the other day, I determined to go myself."

"You determined to go yourself," Ermyntrude said as in a dream.

"Yes," Bess answered. "You see, mother, I'm not a child any longer. I have the right to my own views."

"Your own views," Ermyntrude repeated slowly. "But you have always had them."

"No, dear mother," Bess said shaking her head decisively. "I've had yours. But I'm tired of them. I want to be free."

There was silence on both sides. Bess stood leaning

against the wall with her hands clasped behind her. Ermytrude was sitting on a straight-backed chair, staring rigidly at the fresh Martine bottle on the mantelpiece. The sight of it reminded her that Bess had not been well lately. She must be patient with her child. Moreover she was deeply puzzled. No page in that brain-wrecking volume of Comparative Psychology had been so baffling as this human page of a human document thrust thus suddenly upon her unprepared mind. She must have time for thought. And above all, she must be patient.

She rose in her own dignified manner, and approaching to Bess, kissed her gravely on the brow.

"My child," she said, "we will speak of this on the morrow. You have had a long day. You are tired, I'm sure. Get to bed early. I am obliged to hurry off. I have promised to attend the Anti-Sweating Association meeting at the Town Hall to night "

She passed out of the room, leaving Bess still standing against the wall, and still undaunted.

"If that won't quell me," she thought, "then nothing will. But oh, why can't dear mother be like other people? Then we could have one big outburst, and begin all over again. Why must she be so good? Oh, why on earth are people good—good and cultured? Oh, dear, what has happened to me. I never used to think such thoughts. Mother always seemed perfect and wonderful, and now she strikes me as being just a little tiresome—not interesting and stimulating like that curious fiddle-maker, for instance—who was he, I wonder—I don't think I shall say anything about him when dear mother questions me to-morrow—for she will question me, I'm sure—yes, she'll make careful notes about the situation to-night and draw up a concise list of questions: one, two, three and four. There I am again, criticising her! What has come over me? Well, it's all Hughie's fault, and I shall impress this on him if he comes this evening. It's he who has put my back up. If it hadn't been for him, I should have gone on, gone on in the same mechanical, docile

way Good heavens, how glad I am that the break has come. But then I oughtn't to be angry with poor Hughie, ought I? But I am, all the same Moreover I must let out to someone. I can't keep everything pent up in me until ten o'clock to-morrow when mother will call me into her boudoir. Oh dear, there's another Maltine bottle, twice the size of the last—mother is thoughtful—if only she weren't thoughtful—and I know she's going to be patient with me—I feel it in the air already—there I am at it again—oh, that wretch Hughie—if he comes ”

Hughie came Now Hughie was by no means stupid, but his brain worked slowly When once started, it moved methodically, even as Lrmyntitude's, and perhaps it was the unconscious knowledge of their common characteristic which had effected a union between their minds The traditional Bending homage had done the rest. Up to the present moment, Hughie had known no reason why he should not continue to give this homage Homage was a habit, like most other things Hughie was a creature of habits He had not realised the revolt which was taking place in Bess How could he? He knew less of a woman's temperament than the average hansom cab driver knows of his female fare He thought Bess had been a little fractious lately, but he rather liked the scoldings she had given him They were followed by extra sweetness and sunniness, and jolly little jaunts which reconciled him to his cruel fate in a solicitor's office in Clement's Inn For in common with numberless young men of the upper middle class, he cherished the stimulating belief that he was badly placed in life Admirably suited to be a solicitor, and to become a useful and honourable member of that mysterious profession, Hughie had the immense satisfaction of thinking that he was cut out to be a dashing explorer like Uncle Ted Easy hours in a first class firm, and excellent prospects for the future tended only to confirm him in this opinion And it really hurt no one, not even himself. Bess might probably have cured him, instead of saying always. '*Poor darling, poor darling*' But he

would have lost a great possession, inexhaustible as radium : a grievance. Perhaps Bess knew that by instinct. Perhaps all women know that their men must be allowed to retain their consoling illusions of martyrdom.

But she did not call him 'poor darling' to-night. She ran down to the drawing-room when he came, forgot her usual dutiful questions about his dull days which were really never dull, forgot even that she was angry with him. She only remembered that she needed to pour out her day's experiences to someone, and to relieve her mind of its overflowing contents. Hughie therefore was doubly welcome, and was greeted in a way which made his young and faithful heart leap within him.

"By Jove, Bess," he cried delightedly, "how pretty you look to-night! Blue does suit you. And I say, how jolly to be alone together, isn't it? By Jove, I do feel happy. What a lucky chap I am!"

Bess did not take any notice of his effusiveness. She began her story at once.

"Hughie, I've had a simply glorious day," she broke out. "I've never before enjoyed myself so much. Every minute of it. And what do you think I've been doing? I've been to see Mrs Rivers, without saying a word to mother, and have spent the whole day with her. And——"

"Without saying a word to your mother?" Hughie asked aghast.

Bess, who was stretching out her hand to reach a fan, dropped it, and stared severely at him.

"Now look here, Hughie," she said, "if you are going to take up that tone with me, it is useless for me to tell you any more."

"But Bess dear," he remonstrated in his astonishment. "You are not yourself. You are not well, surely."

"I never felt better in my life," she answered airily. "I am free—free at last."

"Free?" he repeated, entirely mystified. "What can you mean?"

"I've broken my bonds," she said, "and I'm not going to be dear mother's prisoner any more."

"Prisoner," he gasped.

"Yes," she said nodding her head. "And moreover it's you, Hughie, who have set me free."

"I?" he asked in a tone of hopeless amazement.

"Yes," she said excitedly. "If it hadn't been for you, I should have been content to go on always giving up everything to dear mother, always worshipping her blindly, always offering up everything and everyone to her shrine. But when it came to offering up you too——"

"Offering up me too!" he exclaimed. "Why, Bess, you must be out of your senses!"

"Then," continued Bess not heeding his interruption, "I felt it was about time to strike. I know it sounds awful to say it of mother, and I half hate myself and you too, but she has absorbed everything in my life, including you. She hasn't meant to do it. I know that quite well. But it's her nature, and we've encouraged her. You've encouraged her. Sometimes I've wondered lately whether it wouldn't be better to release you from our engagement, so that you could propose to her and have done with it."

If he could have caught her to his breast at that moment, called her his beloved little idiot of a Bess and scolded her well for even pretending to believe such a monstrous absurdity, he might have been recalled at once from the vague distance to which the experiences of the day had banished him. But Hughie's brain had not arrived at this stage. He was using it for remembering sundry little incidents which might have warned him, but at which he had only laughed—curious little outbursts of impatience which puzzled him, but which he had soon forgotten. He stood riveted, staring at her. And when at last his brain had done its appointed journey and he was able to put his arms around her, he was too late. She shook him off, not unkindly.

"Don't, Hughie," she said. "I feel you're far away. Everyone is far away—I mean every one who belonged to my

life up to yesterday, except of course Uncle Ted. He's part of the whole thing, of course. Oh, those dear people to-day! I shall never forget them. So natural and open. Absolutely different from mother's self-important friends. I know we've had great people at our house, really great people; but they've never stayed in our set—I understand now why they couldn't—of course they couldn't breathe—that wonderful man I saw to-day—he wouldn't be able to breathe here."

Hughie pricked up his ears quick enough now.

"And pray who is he?" he asked in a severe proprietary manner.

Bess did not even notice his manner. This evening Hughie did not exist for her as a personality. He was an audience, dimly perceived, by present: endowed with feelings and emotions, by which had no direct concern with her. So she unburdened herself remorselessly of her new enthusiasms and interests. She talked of Mrs Rivers and her affectionate nature and glorious music: of Miss Tressider's light-hearted fun, and of the strange man who made fiddles and who had repaired her Guarnerius. She rambled on and on about Paul: his genius, his smile, the look of inspiration on his face, his queer wayward mind, his kindness to her, and Harriet's gentleness to him. And here she broke off suddenly, and turned to Hughie fiercely.

"Now listen, Hughie," she said "I'm trusting you fearfully, and you don't deserve it in the least. But if you say one word to mother about this man, I'll never speak to you again."

She did not give him time to answer. She dashed on again at full speed, raving about 'the real thing,' and how it lifts one off one's feet, gives one wings and sets one free. And, her eagerness gathering force the whole time, she described the way in which Paul had burst into the room, and gone down on his knees looking for some precious tool which he had dropped on the floor and which she had the good luck to find for him. A further piece of good luck was

that he recollected having seen her at Graham's and been told that she was the owner of the Guarnerius which he had restored with great skill and loving care.

"I must get the Guarnerius," she said. "I must show you where he has worked on it. I'm so glad to know that it is his work. I could look at it for hours."

She ran off to fetch it, leaving poor Hughie in a state of entire bewilderment. Had Bess gone mad? Or had he gone mad? What on earth had happened to her? Or to him? What was it she had said about it being his fault? His fault? What had he done? Release him from their engagement, so that he might propose to her mother? Oh, she was out of her senses. Propose to her mother? Why, she couldn't seriously believe he loved her mother in that way. He was truly attached to Mrs Bending, and there was every reason why he should be; for she had been good to him always, and made him understand that she knew she was entrusting Bess to some one who would never cease to love her and be faithful to her. Of course a fellow should and would be grateful for that mark of confidence. She had given him the freedom of the house. He was always welcome as an accepted member of the family. She liked to talk with him, liked to hear about law matters. Of course he had been pleased. Bess had been pleased too. She had often said that her mother thought he stated things with remarkable clearness. But wait a minute. By Jove, yes, by Jove, what a fool he had been! Perhaps there had been too many long talks lately,—perhaps—why, he had felt it himself—he had been overjoyed this very evening, for instance, to learn that Mrs Bending was out and that he would be able to have Bess to himself—and now . . .

Bess returned with the fiddle. Her face was radiant, and her eyes were sparkling with pleasurable excitement. There was a careless gaiety in her manner which made her unusually bewitching. There was a joyous little toss of her pretty head, emblematic of emancipation. The lover in the young man sprang out to claim her.

"Bess, my own little sweetheart!" he cried passionately, and he put out his arms for her.

"Don't, Hughie," she said, but again not unkindly. "Look here now, I want you to see this fiddle."

"Confound it, I don't want to see it," he answered sullenly. "It doesn't interest me in the least. Put the beastly thing away, and tell me what is the matter with you? That's what I want to know. I don't understand you in the least this evening."

"I don't understand myself," she owned. "I know I feel wonderfully happy and free, and miles and miles away from everyone. I feel as if I had passed through one incarnation, and come into another, quite different from the last, and quite glorious and splendid. Oh, really, I think I'm best alone this evening. I'll go upstairs again, Hughie. Good night, good night."

She waved to him light-heartedly, and was gone before he could speak a single word of remonstrance. Anger and indignation took instant possession of him at being treated in this cavalier fashion. He hurried into the hall, caught up his hat and coat, and banged the door after him. Bess heard him go.

"Dear, dear," she said with perfect equanimity, "that's Hughie rushing off in a rage. Well, it can't be helped. Some things can't be helped."

But poor Hughie, who had not passed into a new incarnation, in which the importances of a former state were of no account, paced the streets, and fought with the demons of anger and wounded pride. When that battle was over, and he was calmer, a flashlight made some of the mystery clear to him. Oh, what a fool he had been! He realised that Bess was right when she said that her mother absorbed everyone and everything. Yes, she had been absorbing him too. He realised that he had actually been spending more time with Mrs Ermyutrude than with Bess. Yes, those long talks about conveyancing, those games of chess entered on at first as a means to an end, had been subtly transformed from a secondary to a primary place. Oh, what a duffer he

was not to have foreseen this! He knew now that Bess herself had unconsciously warned him a dozen times. He stood still. He would go back to her and tell her he understood. But what was the use of that? She was miles away from him to-night.

Then it struck him that he would seek out Uncle Ted; and the mere thought of the Captain, Bess's adored 'sea robber,' brought comfort and courage into the young fellow's troubled heart. He tumbled into a hansom, and was soon set down at Queen Anne's Mansions.

Captain Bending was at home, and received Hughie with a cheery: "Hullo, old chap. Glad to see you. Have a cigar. Too good for me. I like my old Dutch pipe the best."

He was sitting at his desk, smoking his favourite pipe, and sorting photographs for 'The Voyage of the *Canute*.'

"Look here, youngster," he said, "what do you think of this one: 'Music in the saloon?' Your humble servant playing the concertina, you see. Rather too personal perhaps?"

"Why no," Hughie answered eagerly. "It's a change from all the ice ones. I should have this too, 'Whist in the saloon.' By Jove, that's a good picture, 'Dogs basking in the sun.'"

"Quite a business to decide," Bending said, pushing them aside and getting up from his chair. "And I can't fix my thoughts on them to-night. I'm so confoundedly happy, Hughie. She's going to marry me. Yes, my boy, she's going to marry me, and I'm the happiest man in the world. But you don't look happy. What's up? Boss at Clement's Inn been putting on speed, eh?"

"Oh yes, sir, the usual thing," Hughie answered, with a ghost of a smile. "But that's not troubling me. It's Bess. I'm in Bess's black books."

"Why, what have you been doing, you young scamp," Uncle Ted asked, laying his hands on Hughie's shoulders. "Flirting with some other girl? Carrying on with some little music hall singer? Out with it now."

"No, sir," Hughie answered gravely. "Nothing like that. Bess must be out of her senses. She told me she'd had

serious thoughts of breaking off our engagement, so that I should be free to propose to her mother."

Uncle Ted collapsed on to a chair, rubbed his knees, and went into a fit of laughter.

"Well," he cried, "that's rich! So Ermyntrude has been annexing you, old chap, and Bess has got her monkey up. Exactly like Ermyntrude. I thought something of that sort was afloat, when I came in the other night and found you playing chess with the mother, and Bess sitting by herself looking sulky and reading a book upside down. Bad policy, that."

"It began by being good policy," poor Hughie said. "Bess herself wished it."

"Of course she did," the Captain said. "I'll be very candid with you, Hughie. For some mysterious reason which will never be solved, all we Bendings have paid profound homage to Mrs Ermyntrude, and have required that everyone else should follow our example. But Miss Bess has struck."

He whispered to his secret soul: "And I'm not sure that I have not also struck."

"Bess said she had struck," Hughie stated. "She said she had broken her bonds and was free, and that she was miles away from me and from everyone except you, sir. She went to see Mrs Rivers to-day without telling her mother and——"

"Ah, that's it, then. I wondered," put in Uncle Ted, whistling. "I didn't think Mrs Ermyntrude would have given her consent."

"And," continued Hughie, "she seems to have had a sort of field day. She declared she had never enjoyed herself so much. She raved about Mrs Rivers and Miss Tressider and——"

Hughie stopped suddenly. He remembered that Bess had enjoined silence on the subject of the strange man who had restored her Guarnerius. It was true that she had singled out her mother in connection with this request; but

loyalty suggested to him that he should respect her wish in all instances. So he added :

“ And the whole atmosphere of Mrs Rivers’s house.”

“ And well she might, my boy, I can tell you,” Uncle Ted said proudly. “ Harriet is my Queen, as you know, but they are a couple of fine, generous-hearted women, with no pose about them ; and when you enter the house, you feel that you’ve come into a place where you can breathe and be at your ease. No strain there, you know. No mountain-tops there. No subtle propitiation necessary there. And Bess probably realised the relief of that, and the relaxing of the tension. You see, she has had—well—to continue being candid—she has had years of the other thing, Hughie—that’s the plain truth of it. She has stood it for years, and now she has come to the end of her endurance. Naughty of her to go to Old Queen Street off her own bat, but begad, she has helped me ! She has been a regular little brick. Singing my praises in a most shame-faced manner. All wrong, of course, but confoundedly acceptable. Naughty or not, God bless her, I say. Here, Hughie, let’s drink her health. Pour out a whisky for yourself, old fellow. And for me.”

They raised their glasses, and drank to little Bess.

“ Now, look here,” Uncle Ted went on. “ Believe me, all will come right for you. Bess has broken loose, and needs her freedom. Give her plenty of rope. Some people want plenty of rope, especially when they’ve just found out that they want any rope at all. And don’t go about thinking that you’re the only fellow who has been through this ridiculous experience of being told to propose to his sweetheart’s mother ! It’s commoner than you know, old chap ; and what you’ve got to do is to slow down with the mother, cautiously, of course, and put on speed with the daughter, also cautiously. Knock off the chess. Chess takes a long time. And it’s dull work reading a book upside down by the fireside. Think any worse of you ? No, why I understand the whole situation, People like Mrs Emyntrude swallow up every-

one, and with a beautiful smile on their faces. Oh well, I mustn't speak of Mrs Ermytrude—no use in that—and there's our traditional homage—can't get over that quite—the habit of years, you know. But give up the chess. Go and book some theatre seats—any amount of them. And arrange for a dinner or two at Prince's. Look here, in case there is no cash in the locker, here are three fivers. Get seats for me too. I'll see you through this. We must haul the boat out of the ice."

"No, no, sir," Hughie said. "I've some money put away."

"Well, now's the moment to spend it," the Captain cried cheerily. "There's a time to save, and a time to spend. And this is the time to spend, if I know anything of human nature, especially of female human nature."

"I'll take your advice, sir," Hughie said, laughing for the first time. "You've been most awfully good to me."

"No, no," Uncle Ted answered, stretching out his hand to the young man. "You're a good honest sort, Hughie, and you love my little Bess, and she loves you. And I don't want to see her throw people overboard, as her scapegrace of an uncle has done. But that's over. No more throwing overboard to be done by me. Ah, we men are a queer lot, Hughie. Well, perhaps it is only a fiction, but it does not hurt a fellow to believe that if he'd met the right woman at the onset——"

He broke off, and seemed lost in thought. Hughie waited, hat in hand. At last the Captain looked up and remembered Hughie's presence, and Hughie's difficulties.

"Don't make any mistake about it, my boy," he said kindly. Bess loves you. It will all come right. But be a little patient, and give her a long rope, mind. I suppose there isn't by any chance another fellow on the scenes, is there? I don't suppose there is, else you'd have begun with that item."

Hughie put his hat on the chair again.

"Well, sir," he said with a nervous laugh. "I don't think there really is. I—I was rather annoyed about that man

who makes violins—she raved about him—seemed quite carried away by him—he was there, you know, part of the time. She had a long talk with him before Mrs Rivers came in. But, according to her own account, he's weak in his mind, and I can't think of him as being any rival. She's just taken with his genius. She says he is 'the real thing.' She has the real thing on the brain. No, I don't seriously think he counts. Of course it isn't joyful to hear another fellow praised tremendously. She was a good deal excited over her Guarnerius which he had restored. She actually wanted me to examine his delicate workmanship. I wouldn't look at the beastly fiddle. But all the same, sir, I'm not fearfully worked up about him—a little uneasy, naturally. Anyone would be. He appears to be part of——”

Hughie left his sentence unfinished. He recollected too late that he had broken his resolve to be silent concerning this mysterious member of Mrs Rivers's household.

Bending who was leaning against the mantelpiece staring into the fire, turned round and asked in a metallic tone of voice :

“Part of what?”

“Part—part of the atmosphere,” poor Hughie said nervously.

“Of course, of course,” the Captain answered with unwonted sharpness. “What else should he be? They look after him—a relative—dependent—helpless—all that sort of thing—no, I'm sure you needn't regard him as a rival—Bess just carried away for the moment by his genius—by 'the real thing'—a new type to her.”

“Yes, no doubt that's it,” Hughie agreed, encouraged by Uncle Ted's decisiveness. “Well, good night, sir, and thank you again.”

He had reached the door, when he paused and turned towards the Captain with a half shy little smile on his boyish face.

“Of course I'll give her the long rope,” he said eagerly. “But I hope that queer fiddle chap won't take the wind out

of my sails, even in an impersonal sort of way. I never wished to be a genius before, but by Jove, I do now. Bess was awfully excited over his work, and delighted that he had invited her to his workshop upstairs."

"The long rope, my boy, the long rope," Uncle Ted said nodding to him kindly. "It will all come right. And you'll live to be Solicitor General. Easy, easy!"

The door closed on the young man, and Uncle Ted was left alone. He paced the room for some time, and then relit his pipe and settled down in his easy chair. *Part of the atmosphere. Workshop upstairs.* And Harriet had never once spoken of this man. Never once. He had seen him on the door step of No. 30. He had seen him at Graham's. Ermyntrude had spoken of him. His answer to Ermyntrude was that if there was anything to learn, he would learn it from Harriet herself. But Harriet had told him nothing. She had been gathered to his breast. They had exchanged their vows of love and devotion. They were pledged to become man and wife. Their life was to be one life. Their thoughts, their hopes, their ambitions were to be welded together. In his love and his passionate ecstasy he had not remembered anything save that he loved her. *Part of the atmosphere. Workshop upstairs.* And he had not even heard of the man's existence from the people in whose house he apparently lived.

Had they deliberately hidden him? It looked like that. And yet Ermyntrude had seen him. And now Bess had seen him. Why hadn't he seen him? That might have been merely chance. That did not matter in itself. But what mattered, was that he had not been told a single word, that Harriet had suffered him to come and go, time after time, without mentioning or explaining Paul Stilling to him. For the Captain believed, of course, that there was some simple explanation. Had he not himself given the simple explanation which flashed across his mind instantly, that this man was a relation, a dependent? But why then should there be silence on the subject? It was natural enough that the

poor chap should be looked after. Nothing to be ashamed of. In most families there were calamities of some kind, and responsibilities which had to be bravely accepted. Rumours? What had Ermytrude said? Something about vague rumours which she begged him to substantiate or destroy before he definitely proposed to Harriet Rivers. She had urged that he knew nothing of Mrs Rivers. He had answered that his belief in her was implicit, that no one could blame her for not having any relations alive, and that her frank and generous nature would never allow her to keep any fact back which was right for him to know. And now?

He sat puzzled and perplexed, but clinging with unalterable chivalry to his belief in Harriet, defending her against a whole world of accusers, protecting her from whole armies of Ermytrudes and bank managers, and prepared to horse-whip anyone who dared to breathe one word against her.

"As for frankness," he said aloud, "I'm a nice one to demand frankness from other people."

Suddenly there came a knock at his door, and to his amazement Quong entered the room, smiling as ever, and holding a letter.

"Quong!" he exclaimed. "You here at this hour? No bad news, I hope? How did they let you through, I wonder?"

"Mrs Livers said put letter in Captain's own hands," Quong answered cheerfully. "People downstairs heap angly. I heap laugh. Good-bye."

He vanished.

This was what Captain Bending read:

"MY BELOVED EDWARD,

"In the joy and rapture of our love, I forgot everything I wished and planned to tell you. I had meant, after a great struggle with myself, to anticipate your avowal by giving you my history. Then you could have been silent if it seemed better to you. But all thoughts passed from my brain, except the one overwhelming thought that I loved and was loved. Reason, duty and fair play were swept away in

that avalanche of happiness. Forgive me. Forgive me. Let it be as though you had not asked me to share your life. Come and hear my story first. HARRIET RIVERS."

The letter dropped from his hands. So Ermyntrude was right. Harriet had something to tell him. And he was right in believing that he would hear it direct from her.

Through that long sleepless night, his mind wandered first into one region of surmise and then into another; but wherever it strayed, it found the same legend posted up in flaming characters: "*Judge her? And with your record?*"

But Ermyntrude was judging her. Sitting up in bed after her return from the Anti-Sweating meeting in Kensington Town Hall, Ermyntrude made notes on the situation between herself and her daughter, and began her comments with a reference to the mystery surrounding Mrs Rivers. These were her notes, arranged as usual in methodical order.

1. Greatly distressed that my darling child should have visited this Mrs Rivers about whom we have learnt nothing definite, and who may, for all we know, be an unfit companion for a young and innocent girl. I do not wish to misjudge Mrs Rivers, or that Miss Tressider; but I fear they have already begun to exert an unfortunate influence on dear Bess's gentle and docile disposition. I observed a defiance in the dear child's manner, which has never been there before. The direct result of her visit to persons whose codes are obviously at variance with our code.

2. Interview with dear Bess at ten o'clock in boudoir. Shall question her closely as to whom she saw.

3. Shall be very patient with her. Instead of reproaching her, shall patiently tell her my reasons for having wished to make my visit alone, referring delicately to distressing rumours.

4. Edward entirely to blame for this unfortunate occurrence. He has always had a disquieting effect on dear Bess. I have ever tried to counteract it, but in vain. Ill-judged of him to speak to Bess of Mrs Rivers. Must put the matter before

him. Very annoying that he is now a celebrity. Easier if he had continued to be first mate or Captain of a tramp steamer.

5. Bess not at all herself. Perhaps a change useful. Perhaps Bournemouth or Littlehampton.

6. Mr Theodore Theodore, the poet. What had she meant by speaking disparagingly of that great genius? She herself considered him to be a genius. She knew. Affected ass, Bess had called him. Oh, plainly the darling child had been getting perverted notions into her head. Why, his last volume of poems, dedicated to herself, contained truly sublime thoughts.

7. Her own views. Not a child any longer. Wished to be free. Astonishing statements. She had never interfered with the development of her child's individuality—nay, she had ever encouraged it. Hughie's constant presence in the house an instance of the freedom which she had granted Bess ungrudgingly. Had she not ever held the theory of the sanctity of the Individual?

Ermyntrude put down her note-book and pencil, and opened a volume of philosophy, at a chapter called, *The value of the individual unit*. She read it carefully and painfully through, battling with fatigue and yawns. The minute after she had reached the end, she passed gratefully into her usual dreamless sleep.

In the morning she was refreshed and serene. Her brain, adjusted for the ten o'clock interview, had assimilated the essence of the previous night's analytical study; and when Miss Bess came into the boudoir, Ermyntrude received her with a patient sweetness, which, if she had only known, was detrimental to her purpose. For Bess was not wanting anyone to be sweet. Plainly, the thought of dear mother had not been intimidating her in the night. She was still quite fearless, and ready for the encounter. She had dreamed all sorts of extraordinary dreams: and amongst others that she met Stradivari walking over Westminster Bridge. He offered her some Sparkling Moselle, and she said to him: "By the way, isn't your name Antonio?" He answered: "Si. si."

Signora. Antonio Stradivari of Cremona. I wish to look at your Guarnerius. I hear it has been amazingly well restored." She dreamed of Harriet, Margaret, the Chinaman, fiddle heads, fiddle backs, left ribs, and dragon's blood, and she woke joyously to the sound of Chopin's Barcarolle. No, dear mother had certainly not been making her influence felt, and it was uncertain whether she would succeed in accomplishing this feat now.

Dear mother herself, however, had no doubts. She noticed that the slight defiance in Bess's manner had not worn itself away; but believed that it would vanish immediately under the spell of her patient kindness.

"Dear child," she began, "I wish you now to tell me what strange impulse prompted you to visit Mrs Rivers without first consulting me. You learnt probably from your uncle that I myself had called on her. I had my own reasons for going alone and being silent on the subject—reasons which I have, after much careful thought, decided to explain to you. I am anxious, however, to learn why you took this step. You see, I do not reproach you. I have always laid stress on the claims of the individual. But you know that. Up to the present, it has been our good fortune to hold the same views on all matters, important and unimportant. That has been a heartfelt joy to me, dear Bess. I have seen other mothers and daughters at variance with each other. I have ever sunned myself in the thought that my child and I were destined to remain in uninterrupted harmony. It is possible that I have struck some wrong note. I must be patient, and search for the right one. You will help me, I am sure. You——"

Bess had risen from the sofa, and stood before her mother, with flushed face and sparkling eyes.

"Mother," she said excitedly, "I don't want you to be patient. Be angry, be indignant. Let's have it out once for all. Do let us put aside false sentiment and ridiculous pretence. I'm so tired of shamming. I can't go on any longer with it. I want the real thing. I want to breathe

and be free. You think I have been free. You think you've given free play to my individuality. Oh, mother, you can't believe that seriously. You must know, in your heart of hearts, that I've only been allowed to be your echo. I've had to share your views, your opinions. I've had to worship the same people—and what people—that affected ass Theodore Theodore—that dilettante Mrs Dartford Jevons and a whole string of them all admiring themselves tremendously, and posing as geniuses and big gods and goddesses. And because I've never dared assert myself, you've believed me to be in harmony with you—and I've believed it myself until lately. But lately I've been feeling that I wasn't free—oh, you haven't meant to keep me in bondage—you've meant to be a mother on modern lines, I know that—dear mother—it's only that you haven't realised, haven't understood. You've never intended to absorb me as you've done—but you *have* absorbed me—yes, yes, you have—you can't help it—it's your nature—and you're so beautiful and attractive that everyone has encouraged you—I've encouraged you most of all—but you do absorb everyone and everything—why, you have not even left me Hughie—and, if you must know, that's what has roused me—I can't and won't stand that—I'd far rather give him up—I'd . . .”

Ermyntrude, who had been listening with unfeigned amazement, now raised her hand solemnly to check this raging torrent of angry words. There was a flush on her face, and she bit her lips. But she maintained her usual dignified bearing, and her voice betrayed no wounded pride, no excited resentment.

“Bess,” she said gravely, “I can only believe that you are ill. I feel sure you are ill. I have thought for some time that you were out of health. You need a change. You must go to Bournemouth or Littlehampton. I ought to have urged it long ago. You are ill, dear child.”

The girl turned to her mother with passionate impatience.

“Oh, mother,” she cried, “for goodness' sake don't take up that tone with me—it drives me out of my senses. I'm not

ill—I never was better in my life. Can't you understand me? Can't one reach you? No, I don't believe anyone could reach you—oh, the whole thing's simply intolerable . . .”

She flung her arms over her head, and rushed out of the room.

Then and only then Ermyntrode made any sign that she was suffering. She covered her face with her hands and wept

CHAPTER XVI

IT was a lovely day in the middle of February, one of those bright mornings when Nature gives a clear call of awakening and encouragement to the hidden treasures of the early year. Warm sunshine, a soft blue sky, a caressing breeze, made all true Londoners feel that a fine day in their great city, was the finest day ever known in any part of the universe. The birds were singing in a most astonishing fashion in the squares, and parks, and gardens. The rooks high up on the tops of the elm trees, knew that the little purple buds were bursting, and that it was time for them to have finished rebuilding their houses with new pliant elm-twigs. The aconites in Regent's Park were peeping out of their grassy beds; and the points of the crocus leaves were showing themselves with proud determination. The fruits of the plane-trees lay in the gutters, in brown woolly heaps. The gulls on the Thames were donning their black head-dress. Rosy catkins were trimming the sombre boughs of the poplars. The chestnut buds had begun to swell, and presented a shiny and slmy appearance by no means indicative of their glory to come. Nature was at work and had sent round her wonderful message of Spring.

It came to Margaret as she was putting on her hat and coat before going out and escaping from the anxiety attendant on the interview which was to take place that day between Harriet and Captain Bending. Naturally enough, Harriet felt agitated; and Margaret had the conviction that a tornado might take place at any moment. In fact Quong had already received a severe scolding for something someone else had done. It did not make the slightest difference to Quong. He smiled his usual cheerful smile and said:

"Mrs Livers heap closs to-day. Heap solly to-morrow." Margaret, who was anxious on her friend's account, and irritated with Paul for being, in her judgment, the direct cause of all this troublesome complication, decided that the safest way of keeping the peace lay in prolonged absence. So she planned to go and work an hour or two with her photographer friend, dine at the Gourmets, get a cup of coffee at a 'comestibles' shop in Dean Street, and finish up with a visit to the Meres in Whitechapel.

But when she realised the beauty of the morning and all it stood for in the history of the year, a longing came over her to see what Nature had to show her in other parts besides her own private property of St James's ; and she determined to prowl around Regent's Park first, see the sweet snowdrops growing in the grass together with the little blue scillas, find out the new wild garden successfully started that year, and make for Hampstead Heath in time for the sunset. Big Ben was striking eleven o'clock when she opened the front door. She found a telegraph boy on the doorstep, and he handed her a telegram addressed 'Miss Tressider.' It ran thus : "If possible meet me immediately Mecklenburgh Square. Miss Sparrow disappeared. Henry Edgar."

She nodded to the boy to be off, and stood reading the message through again.

"That old wretch has been up to mischief," she said aloud. "She ought to be electrocuted."

Then she hurried to the Embankment, took the Tube to King's Cross, and soon found herself in the severe dining-room waiting for her summons to Aunt Caroline's sacred precincts. The doctor had not yet arrived. Rebecca, the grim parlour-maid, whose appearance was as unpromising as the marble clock itself, looked scared and uneasy. Margaret could get no information out of her. All she could say was : "She's gone. She didn't sleep in her bed last night."

"But what happened, Rebecca?" Margaret asked insistingly. "Was there any upset in the house yesterday, any scene of any kind?"

"She's gone," Rebecca repeated mechanically. "She didn't sleep in her bed last night."

Mercifully for Margaret's patience, Dr Edgar arrived. His face was grave, but it brightened when he saw Margaret, and he said :

"I'm so thankful you've come. Most distressing, isn't it? I've communicated with the police. Most mysterious. I can't understand it, can you?"

"Yes," Margaret answered bluntly. "There's nothing mysterious about it. That old wretch of an aunt of mine whom you admire so much, has taxed Sparrowbird's little spirit beyond all bearing. I've been a companion, you know. I can guess. There was probably a cruel scene. Has your patient confessed anything of the sort to you?"

He shook his head.

"I can get nothing out of her," he said with a half smile. "That's why I sent for you."

"To give her a shock?" Margaret suggested with a tone of teasing in her voice. "Oh, I'll give it willingly enough. Come, let us go up together. And then I'll run off to the Young Women's Christian Association in Bayswater. She may be there. It has always been her principal resort for dissipation. That and the Aerated Bread Shop, No. 66 New Oxford Street. But she couldn't have slept there, of course. Ah, and then there's Judge's Walk, Hampstead Heath. She may be with her blind old cousin.

"I have an operation at one o'clock," Dr Edgar said. "But I shall be free at half-past two. If you have no news of her at the Young Women's Christian Association, I could run you up to Hampstead in my motor. I should like to help you in the search. I have always had a great sympathy with little Miss Sparrow."

"Sparrowbird adores you," Margaret observed quaintly. "She thinks you are very noble."

"Poor little soul," he said kindly. "That's because I've sometimes urged her to take an hour or two of recreation. An easy way of winning a noble reputation."

The sour-faced Rebecca having brought them the permission to ascend to Aunt Caroline's room, they went upstairs, knocked at the door and were told to enter. Aunt Caroline was sitting bolt upright on a stiff-backed chair, holding her stick in her hand. She was extremely tired, for she had been moving about the room, doing for herself the numberless little services which Miss Sparrow had rendered her during many long years of quiet patience. She looked the picture of helpless desolation. She turned to Margaret and said :

"The dog has not had his bone. Most annoying. Everything has gone wrong. Most inconsiderate of Miss Sparrow. And I never could stand servants around me. You'll stay, of course."

"Indeed I won't," Margaret replied. "Dr Edgar can no doubt find you a nurse-companion. I am going off in search of Miss Sparrow."

"That's no use to *me*," Aunt Caroline said, waving her hand in dismissal of the subject. "What have you come for, then? The doctor told me that he was sure you would help."

Dr Edgar had retreated to the window, and stood staring out at the fine plane-trees, with their graceful boughs, and tasselled catkins. He was ashamed of this selfish old sinner, and ashamed of himself for being her medical attendant. Manlike, he felt he could not deal with the situation. Manlike, he left it to another. He even thought of slipping out of the room ; but he decided that the door was too far away for convenient escape. So he stayed and persuaded himself that his silent presence at least gave a sanction to Margaret's interference.

"Now, look here, Aunt Caroline," Margaret began in business fashion. "It's all very well for you to pretend to ignore Miss Sparrow's disappearance. She has to be found, you know, and you have to tell us exactly what occurred last evening."

"Nothing unusual occurred," Aunt Caroline answered,

waving her hand again. "That's enough. If you don't intend to stay, please go and telegraph immediately for a nurse-companion. She must not be over forty."

"I don't suppose anything unusual occurred," Margaret went on perseveringly. "I merely want to know what took place exactly. You'll have to tell it, Aunt Caroline. Much better tell it to me than to a detective. Miss Sparrow must be found, just as though she were a real human being, instead of your tired out machine."

There was a pause. The doctor at the window, and Margaret at the fireside waited for an answer. At last Aunt Caroline spoke.

"I have always disliked having servants about me," she said grimly, "and I can't change now. I'm too old. And Rebecca is sour-visaged. I will say this for Miss Sparrow. With all her faults, she was not ugly. I'd better see the nurse companion before she is definitely engaged. I am particular about looks."

There was another pause. The doctor glanced round expectantly.

Then Margaret said casually

"Well, good bye, Aunt Caroline. I have no time to waste. Miss Sparrow must be looked for without any further delay. We'll send a detective to you. I hope he won't upset your nerves. But I fear he will. He won't be as patient as I am, because of course he can't know that you have no horizon. However, I'll give him a hint. Good bye. I'll be off to the Young Women's Christian Association."

Aunt Caroline tapped on the floor angrily with her gold headed stick.

"Miss Sparrow's not worth talking about," she said sternly. "She has been most ungrateful to me. Probably you don't realise all I've done for her. Why, I've even remembered her in my will."

"No doubt to the tune of five pounds," Margaret remarked reflectively. "I can quite believe that."

"No, it was ten pounds," Aunt Caroline answered sharply.

"How generous you are," Margaret said innocently. "William takes after you, decidedly. Now I must really hurry off. Good-bye, Dr Edgar. Yes, those trees are fine, aren't they? Isn't the bark coming off in huge patches? Goodbye, Aunt Caroline. I hope you'll like your detective and your nurse-companion."

But again Aunt Caroline detained her.

"Everything went wrong yesterday afternoon," she said. "Miss Sparrow broke a valuable vase, she coughed all the time she was reading to me, and refused to take the dog out. She said she had neuralgia."

"And you told her you didn't pay her eighteen pounds a year to have neuralgia, I suppose?" Margaret ventured.

"How do you know that?" the old lady asked fiercely.

"Because in my time I've been a companion at eighteen pounds a year," Margaret answered. "And the smaller the salary, the fewer the human rights. Certainly neuralgia would not be included on that minute list."

Aunt Caroline waved her hand, but she went on with her narrative.

"I told her I didn't pay her a handsome salary to be ill," she continued. "And if she were going to be ill, it would be better for her to leave my service. I gave her a month's notice then and there."

"You gave her a month's notice?" Margaret said, coming nearer to Aunt Caroline. "A month's notice after sixteen or seventeen years of faithful service?"

"Well, you didn't expect me to give her two months' notice?" Miss Benbow retorted.

"You are a very cruel old woman, Aunt Caroline," Margaret said, with great heat. "You've broken that poor little thing's spirit, and now no doubt you've broken her meek heart. Shame on you. I hate you."

Dr Edgar left the window, and put his hand gently on Margaret's arm.

"Hush, hush," he enjoined in an undertone. "Remember your aunt's extreme old age, Miss Tressider."

‘I can only remember her extreme cruelty, Dr Edgar,” Margaret answered aloud. “Miss Sparrow has served her unfailingly through the long dreary years, and this house was at least a home to her—goodness, what a home—still it was her fixed abiding-place, and she knew none other and could have imagined none other—she could not go out and battle with circumstance as I’ve been able to do—oh, I know the whole thing by heart—and it’s the tale of hundreds of faded homeless women—and . . .”

‘You can go and bring her back,” Aunt Caroline said sullenly. “She can come back and resume her duties. I withdraw my notice.”

“I would spend my last farthing in keeping her away from you now,” Margaret said with biting scorn.

At this juncture Dr Edgar interfered.

“Go now, I beg of you,” he said in a tone of voice which had a distinct ring of command in it. “We have learnt enough to guide us for the moment. Miss Sparrow evidently left here in distress. I shall expect you at half-past two in any case, and shall hold myself in readiness to go to Hampstead, if necessary.”

He opened the door for her, and looked at her with impersonal severity. Her natural instinct was to resent this masterful exercise of professional authority; but the quiet force of the man prevailed. She knew he was right. She gave one last glance of contempt at Aunt Caroline’s steely old face, and nodding good-naturedly to him, passed silently out of the room.

“It’s his duty to protect the old woman,” she said to herself. “And my gridiron was becoming pretty hot.”

She took a taximeter and drove first to the Aerated Bread Shop, where Sparrowbird had been in the habit of going for many years. The manageress was sure that the little lady had not taken a meal there on the previous evening. The accountant said the same. One of the waitresses confirmed their statements.

“I should have known,” she assured Margaret. “She

always brings her saccharine tablets, and always gives me twice as good a tip as anyone else."

Margaret then posted off to the Bayswater branch of the Young Women's Christian Association in Westbourne Grove. The servant made enquiries, and learnt that Miss Sparrow had not been there. Margaret asked to see the manageress, and told the story of Sparrowbird's disappearance. The manageress was greatly concerned, sent for several members who chanced to be at home, and satisfied herself personally that Miss Sparrow had not been seen for the last few days. She promised to question all the other residents as they came in. Margaret left the place, feeling greatly depressed.

"Poor little Sparrowbird," she thought. "That's a dreary enough club to satisfy the most stringent requirements of the higher life. However, it has been a joy and comfort to you. Joys and comforts are only relative, after all. Even the front door looks converted, and the hall table too."

She arrived at Upper Brook Street. She asked for Dr Edgar, and the man-servant, Ellis, enquired of her respectfully if her name were Miss Trescider. She nodded.

"The doctor is not very well, madam," Ellis explained. "He gave instructions that he would see only you."

Dr Edgar was leaning back in his arm-chair. His face was ashen. He signed to Margaret to be seated, and seemed to make a tremendous effort to gather himself together. He failed. Margaret glanced at him in astonishment, and suddenly her quick brain leapt to comprehension.

"Something gone wrong with the operation?" she asked in the gentlest way.

"Yes," he said in an almost inaudible voice. "The young boy—died."

She rose, and took the plate of untouched sandwiches which was lying on his table.

"You must have some sandwiches with me," she said kindly. "I'm always hungry. I also have had no lunch. And we shall want a little whisky and soda. In that cupboard, I suppose? Yes. Ah, I thought so. . . . Come now,

drink this off, and eat this horrid little sandwich. Oh, it isn't so bad as it looks. That's right. And now another pull at the mixture. Good. And now another of these higher-life sandwiches. Feeling better?"

He nodded silently. She sat down once more, and gave him an interval of quiet in which to recover himself. Then she said:

"You did dismiss me in splendid professional style, didn't you? That will be an everlasting feather in Aunt Caroline's everlasting cap."

"She was looking frightened; she was becoming pale," he said, smiling a faint smile.

"Well, I always thought people turned red when they were being roasted," she remarked. "But I daresay I am wrong. It is quite possible I am colour-blind."

He smiled again, this time less feebly. He was beginning to revive. Margaret's comments and ministrations were calling him back from that dreary death distance to which the ill chance of his morning's failure had relegated him. She saw with great relief that he was better; and encouraged by the success of her methods, she suggested to him that he should tell her where to find a cigarette. He pointed to the left hand drawer of his desk.

"Please excuse the liberty," she said. "I feel I really must have something to help me recover from the Young Women's Christian Association front door. It aroused in me emotions of melancholia. Poor Sparrowbird! Well, she regards it as the entrance to Paradise, and perhaps it is. Ah, so you are going to have a cigarette too. Capital. Why, surely that is a photograph of Mrs Ermytrude Bending on your mantelpiece. Yes, she is handsome. No mistake about that. But severely superior. Goodness, I'm glad I'm not called upon to live on her moral mountain tops. Five minutes to the half-hour. Shall I take a taxicab, or do you still intend to let your chauffeur run me up to Hampstead?"

"I am going with you, myself," he said, eagerly, for the first time rising from his chair.

"Don't you think it is better for you to rest here?"

Margaret asked kindly. "You do not look very fit to conduct a search."

"It will do me a great deal of good to come," he answered. "I have nothing special to take up my time this afternoon."

"I always understood West End physicians had no time," Margaret remarked. "I always thought that they made so many appointments that they scarcely found three minutes to spare for each separate case. As you told me on another occasion, what a lot I have to learn!"

He laughed a little. Margaret had won him back to real life.

"Perhaps even West End doctors learn something," he said. "Perhaps they learn to make fewer appointments and to give each case more time, and themselves more leisure."

"Perhaps Aunt Caroline will learn to be humble in spirit, like myself," she returned mischievously. "Perhaps Mrs. Ermyntre's bending will come down from her mountain tops. Who can tell? The possibilities of existence under modern conditions are at least varied."

He was pressing the bell as she spoke, but he turned to her with an impulsiveness which he at once checked, but which she nevertheless noticed.

"Well?" she asked meekly. "Have I been disrespectful to West End medical susceptibilities?"

"No," he answered smiling. "I was going to tell you of the important decision to which I've come. And then I changed my mind."

He stood silent, until Ellis, answering the bell, reported that the motor was at the door.

So thus together they went in search of Sparrowbird. The day had gained rather than lost in beauty, and the black-birds and thrushes welcomed them to Regent's Park, where the sun was betraying the presence of tiny buds on every branch and bush, and delicate clouds were peeping caressingly through the open ironwork of the barren boughs. A gentle breeze persuaded the catkins of the planes and poplars to dance lightly in the air.

Dr Edgar began to speak of his morning's trouble.

"It cut me to the heart to fail," he said, "not only for my own sake, but for his mother's."

After a pause he went on :

"I have never become accustomed to Death. Familiarity with death has not brought me a merciful indifference. Sometimes I wish it had. But there are other times when I am thankful that I can still feel awe at the mysterious passing away of the spirit. Even though death may release from suffering, there remains always the secret meaning of the future, yes, and the secret meaning of the past, and the hidden interweaving of them."

"Then you think there is a meaning and an interweaving?" Margaret asked eagerly.

"Surely, surely," he said simply. "I have never doubted that."

"If one was sure, things would be worth while," she said wistfully.

"Are not things worth while to you?" he asked.

"No," she answered. "Not specially."

"Have you no philosophy to help you?" he asked.

"We are dependent on some kind of support, mental or moral."

"I have learnt the rough and tumble philosophy of the interested spectator," she said quietly.

"You have struggled through many difficult chapters to reach as far as that one," he answered.

"I have skipped a great number," she answered. "They were not for my brain, for my temperament."

"And are you satisfied with your resting place in the volume?" he asked.

"Did I say I was resting?" Margaret questioned with a half smile.

"I have always thought that impersonality implied restfulness," he replied.

"Perhaps the doctrine breaks down, as all other doctrines when too closely scrutinised," she said.

"And what then?" he asked. "A return to the chapters carelessly missed out?"

"Perhaps," she said, and she relapsed into silence which he at length broke. He spoke of Miss Sparrow, and asked for some particulars of her life and history.

"She has not had any life nor any history," Margaret answered, "except perhaps the history of not being needed by anyone. If Sparrowbird were to die to night, I don't suppose anyone would care—except myself. I should care very much, from a sort of 'esprit de corps,' you know."

"Were you at school together?" he asked. "Surely not. She must be much older than you."

"Sparrowbird is younger than I am," she said. "But her spirit is broken, and mine isn't. No, we were not at school together. But we belong to the same vast company of the unneeded."

"How absurd of you to speak in that way," he said curtly, almost angrily.

"How much less absurd to recognise a fact which isn't gay and make the best of it," she answered. "I consider I am a most sensible person."

"Mrs Rivers needs you," he said. "You have your own niche in her home."

"Mrs Rivers will probably marry again," Margaret said carelessly, "and then good bye to my niche. That's what happens to most niches. Indeed I don't mind telling you that this very day a decision is to be made, and that I shall hear the result when I return. And I hope with all my heart that I shall have lost my niche."

"Then you want Mrs Rivers to marry?" he asked, struck by her single mindedness.

"Of course," she answered. "You don't suppose that I wish to keep my niche at the expense of her happiness. But it remains to be seen whether she has found a man worthy of her."

They had now arrived at the beginning of that beautiful side of Hampstead known as Frognal. Sparrowbird's cousin's

house was hard by Judge's Walk, at the far end of Frogna! The best and most picturesque approach to it was up the long hill: past the Manor House on the left: past Frogna! Hall on the right, and its garden of fine trees through which could be seen a charming view of Old Hampstead Church: past the little embowered lane, where only a year or two ago the turnstile, dear to Hampstead hearts, remained as an innocent barrier to Church Row, that old world corner with its limes in the middle of the road, its Georgian houses, and its ivy-grown church, watched over by brave old hollies, loved by thrush and redbreast. Up they mounted past the splendid old garden wall of Frogna! Lodge, past the Old Mansion with its one remaining cedar, past the terraced garden of The Oaks, and the mysterious and sweet seclusion of Bay Tree Lodge where Johnson was supposed to have written his *Vanity of Human Wishes*. They sped past Grove Cottage, formerly the old Frogna! Inn, and Montague Grove, with its home farm, its fine elms, and its carpet of grass for snowdrops, crocuses, daffodils, Lent lilies and tulips, all in their own good time. So they reached the Lower Terrace, rich in trees, grassy slopes, and lovely vistas; and finally Judge's Walk, where the rooks were cawing in their sweet hoarse voices, and the open country stretched far away to generous distance, dim and mystic sometimes, and at other times strangely clear, as in Alpine regions.

They stopped the motor at a little creeper-covered cottage. The blinds were drawn down, and at the next house also. A curious foreboding of ill came over Margaret as she rang the bell and waited outside the old panelled door. A servant appeared. She had been crying. Margaret asked her whether Miss Sparrow were there. No, not now. But Miss Sparrow had called yesterday evening, and had gone away when she learnt that Mistress had died suddenly in the morning.

"She went upstairs, and saw the poor dear lying peacefully in her coffin. And then she left the house," the maid told Margaret.

"Did she say nothing?" Margaret asked. "Did she seem distressed?"

"She said she had lost her best friend, miss," the maid answered. "Yes, she looked very distressed even before she learnt that Mistress was dead."

"At what time do you think she arrived here?" Margaret asked.

"The clock was striking nine when I opened the door to her," the maid replied.

"She did not go back to Mecklenburgh Square," Margaret said. "We are searching for her. You must tell us all you know."

But there was nothing more to be told. Sparrowbird had only spoken these few sad words. "*I have lost my best friend*," and then she had slipped out into the darkness of the night. No one knew whither she had gone and what had become of her. Dr Edgar consulted with the police, and a systematic search was at once begun. Margaret and he searched on their own account. Margaret knew some of Sparrowbird's favourite bits on the West Heath; and they went first to that wind-sheltered part known as 'Madeira,' and afterwards to the Leg of Mutton Pond, on the further side, where in the fulness of Spring, the hawthorns vouchsafe us a vision of beauty impossible to be forgotten.

Margaret called her name.

"Sparrowbird, Sparrowbird," she cried aloud. There was no answer. On and on they went, working through the bushes, first in one direction and now in another. Once they saw in the distance a little figure huddled up on a seat, and they hastened their steps, trying to persuade themselves that this was she; but before they arrived at the place, they knew at a glance that it was not Sparrowbird. They tramped over the whole of the West Heath, down through the orchards of Golder's Hill, up by the plantation of Scots firs, down by Wild Wood with its deep Devonshire lane, up by the Spaniard's Road, up hill and down dale the whole time, and with nothing to guide or encourage them. The hours passed.

The sun had long since gone down in a golden splendour, and the dimness of the early spring evening was accentuated by a delicate mist through which the stars were nevertheless able to pierce with mysterious brightness.

Dr Edgar came to a standstill.

"It is useless for us to continue," he said kindly. "Don't you see it yourself? The heath keepers know the whole process by heart, and the ponds will be dragged. Come home. You are worn out."

"There is one other place," Margaret answered, almost pleadingly. "Over there. I must go there, Dr Edgar. She was fond of the view from that little hill. I've sat there sometimes with her, when she took her summer holiday with her old cousin. Only there. And then we'll go home."

He followed her silently over the ground she knew so well. They crossed the Rotten Row, and mounted the little slope. They might indeed have persuaded themselves that they were miles from any habitation, that the moors and gorseland stretched far and wide on all sides, and that they had lost their way in a desolate and wild country. Again Margaret's cry went up: "Sparrowbird, Sparrowbird." There was no answer. But suddenly Dr Edgar whispered: "Hush, hush. I thought I heard some one moaning."

"No, no, it's only the wind," Margaret replied. "The wind always moans here."

"No," he said, "it's a human voice. I believe it comes from that clump of oaks with the paling round them."

They crept closer and listened. There was no sound. They were moving nearer, when they distinctly heard a low moaning and sobbing. They stood arrested.

"*Not wanted*," the voice wailed, "*not wanted, not even by her.*"

"Ah, it's she," Margaret said with a cry of deep understanding; and the next moment, the woman who had herself been buffeted by life's chances, was holding in her arms the little broken-hearted, broken-spirited member of the great company to which they both belonged.

"Sparrowbird, Sparrowbird, don't you know me?" she asked time after time, with increasing distress.

"Not wanted, not wanted," Sparrowbird murmured, heedless of the kind hands soothing her and the anxious faces bent over her. "Not wanted even by her. Not loved by any one—not wanted even by her. I tried to be patient, so that she might want me—it was all I had in life—to be wanted by her—and now——"

"*You* speak to her, Dr Edgar," Margaret entreated. "Perhaps she will recognise your voice. You've always been good to her. Perhaps she'll know you."

He knelt down by her side, took her cold hands and warmed them.

"Sparrowbird," he said, unconsciously using Margaret's pet name for her, "we've all been looking for you, we've been needing you dreadfully, nothing has gone right without you, can't get along without Sparrowbird, we've come to take you home—you know me, of course, don't you, Dr Edgar, you know, Dr Edgar, a great friend of yours, who thinks no end of you, and here's Miss Margaret Tressider, another great friend of yours, who thinks no end of you and we've come to take you home—can't do without you——."

For a moment the moaning ceased. Some fleeting comfort had reached her distraught brain. But almost immediately she began to sob again, and became unconscious of their presence. He tended her, wrapped Margaret's warm cloak round her, lifted her frail little form in his arms and carried her over the heath land to the Spaniard's Road, where the motor was waiting for them.

"We must take her to a nursing home," he whispered. "She is very ill."

"No, take her to Mrs Rivers," Margaret said decidedly. "I am quite sure she will be welcome there, and we can put her straight into my own bed."

"Are you quite sure?" he asked. "It is a responsibility. She is very ill."

"Absolutely sure," Margaret answered, with a quiet smile.

"You need have no doubts. Harriet Rivers does not fear responsibilities."

But he still hesitated.

"You spoke of a crisis," he said. "What then?"

"If Harriet Rivers is happy," Margaret said, "her happiness will minister to Sparrowbird. And if she is unhappy, I assure you that her sadness will find its comfort in making others happy."

Dr Edgar nodded and told the chauffeur to drive direct to No. 30 Old Queen Street, Westminster.

So in this way, unconscious of kindness, with mind wandering in a wilderness of desolation, and body shivering and shattered, Sparrowbird was brought to a haven.

CHAPTER XVII

ABOUT an hour after Margaret had been summoned to Mecklenburgh Square, Bending arrived at Old Queen Street, and was shown into the drawing-room, where Harriet was waiting for him. He went forward to her with outstretched arms, but she shook her head sadly and drew back from his embrace. She still called him by his name, and there was no embarrassment in her manner; for her spirit had weathered the worst of the storm, and had piloted her into calmer seas.

"Edward," she began, "I did you a wrong yesterday. I——"

"No, no," he interrupted. "I can't have you say that. We——"

She silenced him with a grave movement of her hand.

"You must hear my history," she said quietly. "I meant that you should have known it before you offered me your love. I had not reached that decision without a struggle. Perhaps it is a little fairer to me to say that I had not faced the necessity of making that decision. But anyway, when the time came, I failed. And I am ashamed that I failed. I was carried away by the rush of happiness, but that doesn't really excuse me to myself that I failed."

"Harriet, I entreat you," he said, greatly stirred, "I entreat you not to put yourself and me through this unnecessary misery—we love each other—are made for each other—let us step joyously out into the future and leave the past to take care of itself."

She shook her head; but there were tears in her eyes, and it was obvious that the man's chivalry and tender concern had touched her inexpressibly.

"Edward," she said in a voice that trembled a little, "you must know that this has to be gone through. The past doesn't take care of itself—at least a woman's past does not. I tried to believe that it did. But I found out my mistake almost immediately."

He was leaning against the armchair looking greatly troubled.

"Harriet," he pleaded in broken words, "my own past—such a bad record myself—you've no idea—I've no right to ask respect or consideration from anyone—much less an account—a history—an explanation of anyone's life—and certainly not yours—I do entreat of you——"

A tender light came into her saddened eyes; but she signed to him to be seated, and showed by the dignity of her quiet purposeful manner that she intended to tell her story.

She was sitting on the sofa, and she bent forward a little, but kept her head erect.

"I have told you that I lost my father when I was fourteen years old," she began. "I was left in the charge of a guardian, a distant connection of my father's, who lived in Cheshire. I did not flourish in my new home in Cheshire. I was high-spirited and troublesome, and hated all the little pettifogging restrictions to which I had never been accustomed. At first I used to say, 'Father let me do this. Father let me do that.' But when they began to criticise him and speak harshly of his dear eccentric ways, I learnt to be silent. I ran away once. I was brought back. I was put in a very strict finishing school. I threw an inkpot at the German mistress's head, and was expelled. I came home a little ashamed, but soon recovered my spirits, and began to amuse myself with young men, in a most enjoyable but harmless fashion. There was a lieutenant in the army, a naval cadet, a curate, an architect, an organist and a reckless young Stock Exchange fellow. Then they went their ways, and I was left alone in the boredom of my surroundings. Well, I couldn't stand it. I begged to be allowed to study music at Leipzig. My guardian refused. He was a Methodist, and he looked upon music as the

invention of the devil. So I ran away to Leipzig, and he followed and tried to persuade me to return. But my heart was set on becoming a professional pianiste, and he gave in, out of sheer despair, I think, and arranged everything for me. I worked like one possessed for about eighteen months, and then fell ill, and went home—if you can call it home—to Cheshire. But my guardian believed that he would have no peace until I was married, and off his hands. So when James Blackburn, a rich landowner in those parts, came home from Colorado, and settled down on his estate, not far from Crewe, my guardian deliberately encouraged him to pay court to me. He was a handsome fellow, a good deal older than myself, a splendid huntsman, with a dash about him that quite appealed to me. And I thought to myself: ‘Well, here at least is an escape for me. I shall be my own mistress, and good bye for ever to that deadly atmosphere which has half-killed all the best in me.’”

She paused a moment, as though lost in thought, and then went on:

“I learnt to hate, to loathe him. He was not fit to be entrusted with any decent-minded woman, with any woman. It was an outrage on body and spirit to be his wife. I ask myself sometimes why I stayed with him for over four years. And my answer is that I did not know my way in life, could not have come to a definite decision, as I could now, hadn’t the courage or the common sense to cut myself off from him, couldn’t have stood alone. Many women cannot stand alone. I was one of them. But one day a man came into my life who understood from the beginning. His name was Robert Stilling. He cared for my music. That was the first bond. He was of my own mental class. That was another bond. We spoke the same language. We called things by the same names. No scoffing at sweet and lovely beliefs. No ruthless trampling down of lingering ideals. Oh, the relief of it! I have not lost the sense of relief to this very day. His sympathy lifted me out of the depths of my despair. This alone would have made me love him, would

have made me willing to follow him, out of sheer gratitude, to the ends of the world. But I loved him dearly, passionately, for his own sake. He was honourable, chivalrous, great-minded, and he had the winning gaiety of a bright spirit. So I threw off my bonds of wifehood, and ran away to Florence with him. And although I have had to pay the penalty, as only a woman has to pay—I'm paying it now, Edward—paying it to its utmost farthing, I can never regret what I did. I should be false to myself if I pretended that I regretted it. No, I won joy inexpressible and relief inexpressible. Those eighteen months we were together will remain in my book of life as a beautiful page for which I shall ever gladly give thanks. Of course we were not married. We could not be married because James Blackburn refused to divorce me. But, for all that, I was an honoured woman, and I lost the miserable sense of degradation which my life with my legal husband had engendered in me. My happiness was short-lived. Robert Stilling was suddenly taken ill at Siena, and died within six or seven days. And then my husband divorced me. I was without friends, without relations. Mercifully I had my own money, my father's money. But I was alone in the world except for one curious tie—Robert's stepbrother Paul—a strange perverse being, of fitful intelligence in everyday life, and yet greatly gifted, born with a genius for violin making. Robert had always been devoted to him, and had watched over his welfare untiringly. He left Paul in my care. And I have been glad and proud of his trust in me. I have said to myself that, whatever happens to me, I must never fail Paul. He lives here. This is his home. He comes and goes as he chooses."

She ceased. But added immediately

"That is all I have to say except this one thing. I have not intended to deceive you. I held, and still hold the theory that all have the right to pass on silently—men and women alike. But it has not worked out in my own particular case. I've had no rest about it—I've struggled fearfully over it, and suffered unspeakably. This unburden-

ing of my mind to you, painful in itself, has been the least part of my suffering."

Bending drew his chair a little closer to her.

"And now my history, Harriet," he said quietly.

He turned away from her, and looked straight into the fire. Did he see there the changing pictures of his own careless life?

"I was always a young scamp," he began at last, "always a young reprobate. The guv'nor used to say that I had not the barest elements of affection and gratitude in me, and I believe he was right. My mother pretended to herself that he did me an injustice. I can hear her now: 'Tom,' she said repeatedly, 'the dear boy has a heart. I know that he has a heart.'

"From early boyhood the chief trouble was that I used to disappear. I ran away from home. I ran away from school. I was born with a passion for the sea; and when I broke loose and went off, it was always with the fixed intention of finding my way somehow to the sea. The fact was, I was a rover by nature, but my people could and would not recognise this, until I was expelled from school for the fourth time. Then the guv'nor gave in, and let me go to sea. I was too old for the navy, and so I was put into the merchant service, and, armed with my concertina, left home in fine style, as a smart little middy in one of Green's vessels, the *Atalanta*, bound for Sydney. Well, I hated it. That wasn't my idea of life at sea. I wanted adventures. I wanted to be a real old salt, not a fine dressed up deck-dandy. So when the *Atalanta* reached Sydney, I bolted. After that I was always bolting; and this sort of wild game went on for about seven years, simply because I wouldn't take my second mate's certificate. I shipped sometimes as bos'n, cook, cook's mate, able-bodied seaman. I went in all kinds of deep watermen. A good deal in whalers, up North, you know, for I was a first-rate harpooner. Anything that turned up suited me. My people's pride was fearfully hurt, but I hadn't any pride. I didn't care. But when I came home after a long absence and found the home-hands badly

down on their luck, I was sorry at last and said to myself: 'Begad, I'll cheer them up, and make a bee-line for that second mate's certificate.' So I kept myself quiet and steady for once on land, and pulled the ticket off without any difficulty. And when I waved the piece of paper before their eyes, and showed them it was all 'pukkah,' they broke down completely. Then I realised for the first time what it meant to them and me. I was ashamed at the fuss they made over me. And Sebert, my brother, was a brick. He fumbled at his watch and chain, and handed them over to me. 'Old chap,' he said, 'you'll want a rig of this sort now you've turned respectable. I'm sure you won't let them join the concertina in the Minorities, will you?' And the guv', who had never borne me any grudge for all the pranks I'd played him, roared at this, and clapped us both on the back. And mother laughed till she cried. Then I started the sailor's hornpipe, which had always been the outward and visible sign that all was well with me again. But I meant it this time. And after that I gave the home folk no more trouble. But I didn't change in other ways. I behaved badly to more than one woman, was ruthless, self-indulgent and selfish, and passed on my way without a moment's remorse. Lots of things I've repented of in my man's record, and would give worlds to have left undone. But there are lots of things I've not repented of, and never shall."

Then with head bowed he spoke to her unreservedly about several low and coarse passages in his life. He made no excuses, no comments. He stated facts. He said he could not pretend that he had not had pleasure and satisfaction out of much that now seemed to him unworthy and of no import. He had passed on; but the life he led at one time had had its significance for him, and he used those words which had impressed themselves deeply on his mind: "*At least these blottings chronicle a life.*"

He remained silent for a few minutes. Was he waiting for her to speak? Then he said, almost in a whisper:

"That's my history, Harriet."

She made no sign, no movement, no answer. She seemed to be contemplating the changing lights in the fire, the deep violet and delicate green colours circling round the ship's log which we all love to watch

He began to be troubled by her passiveness. A great fear seized him

"Harriet, he cried, touching her gently on the arm, "have I lost you, have I lost you? Have I ruined my cause for myself? Have I let you realise only too well that I'm a worthless fellow outside the pale of love?"

She turned to him at last

"Worthless," she said very softly, but in a tone of voice which thrilled through him. "I am thinking of the part you've left unrecorded, but which I've heard from those who know—of brave deeds unconsciously done—deeds such as have ever helped to keep our England in her rightful place at the head of brave nations—of eager risk of life to save other lives—of follies and failures outlived—of successes shared gladly with other comrades—of the gov'nor who believed in his scapegrace son through thick and thin, and the mother who never doubted for a single moment that he had a heart."

He flung himself on his knees by her side, and nestled close up to her. She pressed his head still closer to her bosom, and her hands rested on him in everlasting blessing

When at last he rose up, he said in his cheery boyish way:

"And our pasts we've kicked into the depths of the ocean. If they dare to arise, we'll throttle them together, you and I. Won't we?"

"Yes, dear," she answered with tears running down her cheeks. "Yes, dear."

"No more tears now, shipmate," he sang out. "It's time for a pipe. And I want to tell you the ups and downs of that concertina. There now, that's right, no more tears. Lord, how happy we're going to be together. It's begun already, hasn't it? And so you threw the inkpot at the German governess's head! I'm sure she deserved it. Glad

it wasn't the Frenchy's, though. Might have interfered with the Entente Cordiale. Ah, and the fiddle fellow. We'll look after him, my dear. We won't fail him. Yes, that's the same watch chain. No, it didn't go to join the concertina. Other things went, but not that!"

So the happy hours went by, and the love and understanding between them grew and ripened. The romantic idealism of early youth, it is true, was theirs no longer; but they had in full compensation that larger and finer poetry of knowledge, which life vouchsafes to most of us out of the wreck of self and circumstance, and which with its generous rhythm and ennobling significance is there for all to read. It is not in the locked and chained book of selfishness which shuts out the whole world.

It must have been nearly six o'clock when they went upstairs to see if Paul was in his studio. Quong met them on the first landing, and in answer to Harriet's enquiry said: "Yes, Mr Stilling upstairs. He heap hungry to day. Eaten cucumber big as clocodile."

"Ah, that's good," Harriet said smiling, and she led the way up to the workshop. She knocked two or three times, and as there was no reply, she opened the door and peeped in. She signed to Bending to look, too. Paul was fast asleep on his couch, grasping a chisel in one hand, and smiling happily in his dreams.

"Probably dreaming of his oil-varnish," she said tenderly. "And he'll lie there for hours asleep, perhaps twelve or thirteen hours, perhaps more. Then he'll get up, and work like one possessed. Look at his things strewn around. Isn't it merciful that he has this one great gift? He is wonderfully happy. You see, he wants so little, chiefly well-seasoned maple wood, I should say."

Captain Bending slipped his arm through hers.

"We'll keep him happy," he said kindly. "And he shall have all the maple-wood we can lay hands on."

And he added, with a twinkle in his eye:

"Do you know I met him on your doorstep once, and

thought he was the tax-gatherer! He was smiling in the same sort of way, exactly. I suppose that was oil-varnish too?"

"Probably," she answered laughing softly, and she closed the door, and paused on the landing before going downstairs.

"Margaret calls him my old sign-post," she said, looking at the Captain gravely.

"I wish I could boast of one as creditable," he answered raising her hand to his lips.

"Margaret's voice!" Harriet said, suddenly hearing sounds in the hall. "Let us go down and tell our happy story. But what has happened, I wonder? Something wrong? Oh, surely not. Come, Edward."

They hurried down and found Dr Edgar supporting Sparrowbird in his arms, and Margaret giving instructions to Quong, who as usual showed no signs of surprise or perturbation. When she saw Harriet, she said breathlessly:

"Sparrowbird very ill. Aunt Caroline had dismissed her. She has been out all night on the Heath. I brought her straight here, couldn't bear to take her to a nursing home, Harriet, I knew . . ."

It was the Captain who carried Sparrowbird upstairs into Margaret's bedroom, and laid her gently on the bed, speaking kindly words in answer to her moaning. He nipped out his matches and lit the fire; and, quick as all the others were to help, he was the quickest of them all. He took his part amongst them as if he had always belonged to their circle, whispering once to Margaret when she tried to relieve him:

"It is my right to 'stand by' now. Harriet and I are shipmates."

Poor little Sparrowbird had never been so lovingly tended in her starved, sad life; and the irony of fate exacted that she should lie there, unconscious of the kindly atmosphere, unconscious of the unsparing and anxious attention from the Doctor whom she worshipped and Margaret whom she loved, and from the two others, strangers to her, yet bent on serving and saving her. Still that piteous cry went on, *'not*

wanted—not wanted.’ Margaret came down from the sick-room worn out by fatigue and by the pathos of the whole heart-breaking story. Life seemed to her a grim business. With half her mind she envied Sparrowbird who was nearing the end of her long lane of loneliness and disappointment. The words of despair, ‘not wanted—not wanted,’ were echoing in her own ears, as a message intended for herself, the truth of which she vaguely felt to be confirmed by the happiness of the lovers, whose joy was nevertheless a great healing to her tired spirit. Yet if she had only known, there was someone upstairs yearning to win her love, needing her, fixing his very heart on her—and probably in vain. He had dismissed her from the sick-room, gently but authoritatively, in doctor’s fashion.

“Go down and rest,” he said looking at her gravely. “Mrs Rivers and I will watch until the night nurse comes. Try and forget some of the sadness, for a time at least. Promise me.”

She nodded submissively enough, and crept downstairs to the drawing-room, fully intending to allow herself the luxury of half-an-hour’s solid breakdown. But she found Bending established in the armchair, smoking his pipe placidly after having rendered true handy-man service; and the restfulness of his presence instantly soothed her nerves and steadied her emotions. He settled her comfortably in another easy-chair; and they sat together for some time in entire silence, she leaning back listlessly, now staring into the fire, and now watching the rings circling from his pipe. Finally she slept. When she awoke, half-an-hour later, he was still there, still smoking, still keeping guard.

“I believe I’ve slept,” she said.

“Yes,” he answered. “You’ve slept a little. You needed it. Now you must drink this cup of soup.”

“Any change upstairs?” she asked, half raising herself.

“Don’t move,” he said. “No need for the moment. The nurse from the London Hospital has come. My shipmate looked in to tell us.”

"Ah," said Margaret. "I like to hear that—your ship-mate."

"Yes," he answered. "It sounds splendid, doesn't it? She's a brick, that woman—a queen and a brick, isn't she?"

"Yes," Margaret replied gently, "don't I know that too?"

And she added after a pause:

"Dr Edgar was doubtful about bringing Sparrowbird here. But I assured him she would be welcome, and that Harriet would put her own happiness or unhappiness aside for anyone's trouble. Thank God it's her happiness."

"It couldn't have been anything else," he said, "since she loved me, and forgave me my own record."

She glanced at him with a smile of real appreciation.

"I want to tell you something," she said eagerly. "I owe it to her, to you. It was I who kept Paul out of the way, so that you might not see him. I wanted her to send him to the Graham's, his great friends, who would have housed him with pleasure. I entreated of her to let him go, but she would not listen to me. And so, whenever you were expected, I manœuvred him out of the house, or else managed to rivet his attention on his work. Sometimes he helped me in my task by falling asleep; and then I knew that all was well for a good long spell of several hours. At other times, I took lunch with him, ate innumerable cucumbers and bananas to please him, and stitched assiduously at my piece of 'property' embroidery. She had no idea of my deep-laid plans. She never makes any plans to help herself. She couldn't scheme, if she wanted to do so. But I can. And there had to be someone to protect her from her own generous stupidity. I was prepared to tell any amount of lies, and perpetrate any amount of deceit which I thought necessary for her best interests. And I am not ashamed of telling you. I don't care in the least what you think of me personally; but I care with all my heart that you should know direct from me that she had no share in hiding away her old signpost, as I always call Paul. On the contrary, I wonder she did not

plant him on the doorstep. But even then, I should have been there to dig him up."

"Did you have such doubts of me?" Bending asked, greatly moved by her loyalty and her frankness.

"Not specially of you, but of your sex," she answered. "Men find it hard to be generous to women. I don't criticise them. They are hemmed in by traditions and by the code they have created for their own convenience. But now and then, a man rises up head and shoulders above his fellows, and shows the right way for the new generation to tread. You are one of those men. And I, as a woman, say 'God bless you, you dear fellow.'"

He held out his hand to her, and she grasped it in silence.

CHAPTER XVIII

SPARROWBIRD died about a fortnight after she had been brought to the haven at Westminster. She was delirious most of the time ; but the day before she died, her mind cleared, and she was able to recognise both Margaret and the Doctor.

"Where am I, dear?" she asked Margaret who was sitting by her bedside.

"You are with Mrs Rivers and me, Sparrowbird," Margaret answered, "and you are going to be here always, in beautiful St James's Park—lots of plane trees here, too! You are dreadfully wanted here. When Mrs Rivers is married, you and I are to keep house together. Won't that be jolly? I want you fearfully. I can't be left alone, you know."

Sparrowbird smiled, and closed her eyes.

"Really wanted," she whispered. "Thank God."

When Dr Edgar came in two or three minutes later, she opened her eyes and knew him.

"Ah, I see you're better to-day," he said gently. "You must make haste and get quite well. I need someone to come and take care of me. Will you come when you're stronger?"

"No, you can't have her," Margaret said, stroking Sparrowbird's hand. "We want her here, in St James's Park—my Park. Here's her place. We want her here. She can't possibly go to that horrid Upper Brook Street. We can't do without her. You're too late in the field."

Sparrowbird smiled happily first at Margaret and then at the Doctor, at whom she gazed timidly but lingeringly.

"Really wanted," she whispered again. "Thank God."

She closed her eyes after that, fell peacefully asleep—and never woke.

They buried her in Hampstead cemetery. The early March winds had held a council and decided to abate their violence on that day. The sun asserted himself quite masterfully, and encouraged the birds to sing and the buds to swell. He told them that March was here indeed, 'the first redresser of the winter's wrong.' Nature smiled happily at the news, and achieved a good morning's work to the sound of beautiful and welcome music.

Margaret had thought at first of asking Gerald Mere to come from Whitechapel and read the service for Sparrowbird. But she and Harriet agreed that Sparrowbird would certainly have chosen one of the Evangelical clergymen connected with the Young Women's Christian Association, and by preference, a certain Reverend Amos Berridge, whose dull sermons and drawling voice she had ever greatly appreciated. So he came, and the Matron of the Bayswater branch came too, as representative of the Association. Dr Edgar did not, as a rule, attend funerals; but he too was present, together with Margaret, Harriet and Edward Bending.

Aunt Caroline sent a large and handsome chaplet of lilies with her card attached and these words: "In affectionate remembrance from her old friend and employer." Margaret did not wish to put this on the coffin; but Dr Edgar maintained that Miss Sparrow would have thought all the world of this token of regard from her cruel tyrant. And in deference to his better and truer judgment, it lay at the head of the coffin, an emblem of the predominancy, even into the grave, of a cruel old woman's influence over the destiny of her little victim. There were other flowers, roses, yellow narcissus, delicate pink tulips and violet crocuses. Sparrowbird, who had never had a bouquet given to her in her life, could at least boast that, in death, she went to her resting-place shrouded in beautiful flowers.

They left her and turned back to their own affairs, saddened for the moment, and arrested by the mysterious influence of Death, which ever presents its secret and baffling problem, and ever receives it again, unsolved by each

succeeding generation, by each succeeding century. That secret flight of the spirit, that silent crossing of the bridge, that subtle passing into another state, that entire break with all known possibilities—what is it—what is it?

They asked themselves these questions, these vain and fruitless questions, urged on by compelling Death, until Life, the great Healer, bade them pass on.

CHAPTER XIX

THUS Sparrowbird went on her road. Her troubles, her illness and her death brought near together all those who had ministered to her last days. Even Paul made struggles to come out of his aloofness, and tried in his own queer way to bear his part in the sad concerns of the household. When he first heard that Margaret's friend was lying ill in Margaret's room, he offered to go and watch by the sick bed.

"And I could show her the Amati," he suggested. "That would interest her, wouldn't it, Harriet?"

They let him go. He was greatly puzzled over Sparrowbird's unconsciousness, and over her strange ravings. He was not distressed, but much interested.

"I don't think she can be in her right mind," he confided to Margaret. "What is it she keeps on saying about not being wanted? That alone shows she's not in her right mind, Margaret, doesn't it? As if we weren't all wanted."

"Do you believe that, Paul?" she asked, struck, as she often was, by the simple decidedness of his views.

"Of course," he answered in surprise. "What else could I believe?"

It was pathetic to see him steal softly into the sick room, creep to the armchair by the fire and sit there, sympathetic in his silence, quietly bent on showing his comrades that he, too, was sharing their anxiety and fatigue. Once he brought a blood orange, and handed it triumphantly to the London Hospital nurse.

"Give this to her," he said in a whisper. "It's a good orange. I bought it myself. She'll feel better after it. Clearer in the head, you know."

It was curious to notice how Sparrowbird's mental condition occupied his thoughts. Was it possible that some dormant consciousness of his own limitations of intellect made him peculiarly sympathetic with her aloofness of mind, which he dimly recognised as being his own portion in life? Harriet and Margaret both put the question to Dr Edgar, who was unable to answer them. But Paul's brain interested him from the outset; and he took every opportunity of studying the fiddle-maker's special characteristics. He laid stress on a want of continuity in the mental processes, rather than on an arrested development. He pointed out that it was a most usual occurrence for concentration on one subject to produce a minimum of continuity on other subjects. And Paul's case appeared to be an extreme example of this. Paul rather liked him, and after the first shock of being brought into contact with a stranger, accepted him as a matter of course. This also was his attitude to Bending, after a pathetic preliminary known only to Margaret. Harriet had told Paul that she was engaged to be married to Captain Bending, and that she was exceedingly happy.

"Are you?" he said. And he stood looking at her anxiously for a moment, and then vanished.

But he found his way to Margaret, and with that queer excitable manner which always meant that he had had a sudden illumination, he said:

"No one is going to get anything out of *me*. They may try, but it will be of no use."

"Why, Paul, what is it?" she asked in amazement. "What is the matter with you?"

"Harriet's going to marry that explorer man," he said, putting his hand to his head. "She told me. But he won't hear anything from me about her. No, not a word. No use his trying. You can tell him from me. I—I know—sometimes everything is clear to me—and then——"

"Paul," she cried, seizing this precious moment of his mind's lucidity, and deeply touched by his fixed determination to protect Harriet. "Paul, there is no need for

you to worry. Captain Bending knows and understands the whole history. And it's all right for Harriet."

"Ah," he said with a sigh of relief. "Are you sure, quite sure it's all right for Harriet?"

"Absolutely," she answered with emphasis.

He nodded his head, and was slipping away, his sense of responsibility eased and his mental effort relaxed, when he stopped suddenly, and turned to Margaret with a grave and mysterious expression on his face.

"Shall we stay upstairs?" he asked. "Will that be better for Harriet?"

"No, no, Paul," she replied eagerly. "No need for that now. Better for Harriet when we're downstairs."

"Ah," he said, looking pleased; and this time he disappeared from the room, leaving Margaret in a state of tender contrition over her severity with him on a previous occasion.

But after this pathetic little episode, Paul showed that he regarded Bending as a friend and an intimate. The first time he came across him, he asked him up to his workshop.

"I'll show you my new scroll," he said in a most friendly way. "And the Amati. And perhaps the varnish. Not so sure about that, because it's a secret. I haven't told *them*. But perhaps I'll tell you."

And when Harriet and Margaret learnt that he had indeed confided the secret of the varnish to Captain Bending, they knew that Paul had given, from his point of view, the most valuable and distinct expression of his trust and friendship. They were delighted; and although Bending called them a couple of sentimental sillies over Paul, he was himself gratified to have won the goodwill of the old sign-post.

"He's a good and gentle fellow, shipmate," he said to Harriet. "And we'll take fine care of him. But Lord, he has got varnish on the brain, hasn't he? I feel quite hysterical about all the different combinations of gums. And they've all got to be dissolved in linseed oil. Why the devil in linseed oil? Oh, I say, my brain's going!"

Only once did Paul speak of him to Harriet, and that was immediately after Sparrowbird's death, when the Captain came up to the workshop to tell him that all was over.

"Miss Sparrow is dead, Paul," he said.

"Ah," said Paul going on unconcernedly planing the inside of a 'back.' "So she's dead, is she?"

But after a few moments he put down the plane, and said pensively:

"It's a good thing it wasn't one of *them*. But they're strong. They won't die. That's a comfort, isn't it?"

Then his thoughts returned to Sparrowbird.

"So she's dead," he said picking up his work again. "Well, it's no use for people to live when they're out of their minds, is it?"

"No, Paul," Bending answered, repressing a smile.

"Do the people at the North Pole play the fiddle?" Paul asked suddenly.

"I should say not," Bending replied, making for the door, before he laughed outright.

"He is a strange chap," he thought. "I must tell Edgar that queer remark."

But Dr Edgar did not call it queer. He called it a deeply interesting psychological detail, and explained to the sailor that Paul had probably made a great effort to take an interest in Polar regions, but that owing to his mental limitations, this interest had to be expressed in the special terms with which he was familiar.

"His mind tried to take a long journey for your sake," Dr Edgar said. "If you put that and the varnish together, you will realise that in his own way he is asking for your friendship as I, for instance, am asking for it."

"You have it, sir, such as it is," Bending answered. "We've all learnt to know each other pretty well over the Sparrowbird business, haven't we? You've been a brick to them all."

"They were bricks," Dr Edgar said warmly. "And

truly I've never seen such an unselfish woman as Mrs Rivers. You've won a fine, generous heart, Bending. But she also has won a fine, generous heart."

"True about her. God bless her," Bending said smiling radiantly. "But the less said about me the better."

"I wish I'd had the chance of shipping as doctor in your expedition," Dr Edgar said impulsively. "I've been wasting the best years of my life. I know it now. Getting stereotyped before my time. That's what I've been doing, whilst you've been answering to the call of the wild. Ah, what a fool I've been!"

"Most people would say that you've been fixing up a jolly good practice for yourself," Bending remarked, looking round at the comfortable sanctum where they were lounging by the fire. "Can't get away from facts, you know. Upper Brook Street spells success. It's a fine harbour."

"I'm dead tired of it," Dr Edgar confessed. "I want to be free and feel free."

"And what prevents you?" Bending asked.

"Myself," he answered, shrugging his shoulders, "and habit. But I am fighting both those enemies. And I'm clearing off some of my patients. Quite a number; and old Miss Benbow must go overboard, too. I should be ashamed to continue to give any time to her after this cruel affair. I try not to encourage Miss Tressider's anger, but all the same, I share it. Yes, old Miss Benbow must go, and others."

"Well, for pity's sake don't give Mrs Ermytrude the sack before you can help it," Bending pleaded. "That would be a family calamity."

"Oh, of course, she's an exception," Dr Edgar said.

The Captain laughed.

"Edgar, why is she an exception, why the devil is she an exception?" he asked. "I know myself she is, but why, I can't for the life of me think. Can you? Now can you? Now there's another of your—what do you call 'em—psychological details for you. I demand an explanation."

"I never have thought about it," Dr Edgar answered with a laugh. "I accepted the fact from the beginning."

"That's what we've all done," Bending said hopelessly. "And it has landed us in no end of difficulties."

There was a difficulty staring him in the face now, and he owned to himself that he had no courage to meet it. It was fitting that he should go and announce to Ermyntrude his engagement to Harriet Rivers. He tried to persuade himself that it was immaterial to him what attitude she adopted in the circumstances, and that his outward signs of consideration for her sensibilities were inspired by courtesy and not by duty. But in spite of all his convincing arguments, in spite, too, of his dogged determination to free himself from the great Bending tradition of unreasoning homage, the daredevil Captain felt sheepish and uncomfortable at the prospect of an Ermyntrude encounter. If he could have confided in some one, his natural buoyancy of spirit would have asserted itself at once. But there was no one to whom he could turn. He could not, of course, speak to Harriet or Margaret; and Bess for the moment was out of reach. She had written to tell him that dear mother and she had had 'differences of opinion' about her visit to Mrs Rivers and many other things, that dear mother was very kind, but that, nevertheless, 'disgrace was the order of the day.' "And," she added, "I think I deserve it for what I said to her, but not for what I did. I don't in the least regret my revolt against dear mother's authority, and I intend to work out my emancipation at all costs, though I am sorry I have to make her suffer. I am not coming to see you for a few days, Uncle Ted dear. You've had nothing to do with my rebellion. It's my own private affair, my own personal 'expedition,' and I'm not going to have you dragged into it. Hughie and I are rather out of tune with each other also. He's so conventional, and the emancipation rather awes him. I laugh. But he bought two sets of theatre tickets the other day, and asked me in an airy sort of way if I cared to go. I said 'no,' and then changed my mind. He also asked me to dine at Prince's.

I said 'yes,' and then he changed his mind! I will let you know as soon as the first shock of my revolt is over, and things have settled down on fresh lines."

So as he could not seek encouragement from the only person who could have appreciated his nervousness, he decided that his best plan was to gather himself together and make a dash for Melbury Road.

It was a lovely afternoon. The Spring, a fortnight late, according to the experts, had taken a few hurried steps forward, out of sheer gratitude to a continuous spell of sunshine. The almond blossom had opened. The crocuses were no longer peeping shyly out of the grass. No, they had asserted their sovereignty, and now presented to the Londoner's proud eye a picture of gorgeous beauty impossible to rival in any part of the world. White, yellow, violet, and the green of English grass. For what more lovely and inspiring sight could one possibly wish after the sombre months of winter? Bending thought that. He paused to look at the brave little flowers as he walked through Kensington Gardens, and said aloud: "Surely, these cheerful little chaps ought to put courage into me. Now what does Ermyntrude matter to me? Absolutely nothing."

But he changed his opinion in her drawing-room. She was engaged when he arrived, and he had to wait some time in enervating solitude. He enquired for Bess, and learnt to his disappointment that she was not at home. He examined the books on Ermyntrude's special table by the sofa, and gave a long low whistle of despair. She was evidently indulging in extra doses of superfine intellectuality, and would therefore be on her most elevated and inaccessible mountain peak. Ferrier's 'Functions of the Brain,' Oscar Schmidt's 'Mammalia in their relation to Primeval Times,' Spencer's 'Study of Sociology,' a volume of Hegel, and Rutherford's 'Radio-Active Transformations' all had severe looking markers in them, and impressed the Captain with the belief that they were being studied with unsparing conscientiousness.

"Ah, so that's the book," he thought. "What the devil *are* Radio-Active Transformations? Must get Edgar to tell me. Poor little Bess. She must be having a time of it if this is the sort of thing that's going on. Sack alive, I wish I didn't feel so nervous. Wish I were safely stowed away in the *Canute*. If she'd only come. This waiting is enough to kill a fellow off. Ah, here she is! If she'd only given me a minute or two more to pull myself together."

Ermyntrude entered the room with her usual dignity of bearing, and advanced to greet him with an Arctic coldness which numbed his brain and body. She was beautifully dressed in an elegant heliotrope gown, faultless in its details, and ministering in all respects to her natural stateliness. But her face, generally passively intellectual, bore traces of some unusual agitation. She had been suffering. It was remotely possible that she had even been weeping. She took her usual seat on the sofa, and leaned back with the patiently resigned manner which she had ever felt it necessary to adopt towards her husband's brother. It dated back to his old wild days. Sometimes it was less accentuated, sometimes more. His recent achievements had demanded that it should be modified. But to-day there was no modification. His fame, his success, his honoured position availed him nothing.

"A lovely day, isn't it?" the poor Captain said, making a brave attempt to put himself at his ease with her. "Spring has come. And those crocuses in the gardens! I never saw a prettier sight anywhere."

"You should know, being a traveller," Ermyntrude replied. "Yes, the crocuses are beautiful."

There was a pause. Bending fidgeted in his chair, and blew his nose."

"I'm in for a cold," he said valiantly. "Horrid nuisance. Only just lost the other one."

"Ah," she answered, "this is a treacherous time of the year."

There was another pause, and then he said :

"I have been invited by the Berlin Geographical Society

"Ah," she said, "more laurels for you. I am glad."

"Getting on famously with the 'Voyage of the *Canute*,' " he said. "Another week or two, and I've finished it."

"Indeed," she remarked coldly. "No doubt it will be a most valuable addition to Arctic literature."

At last he could bear this fencing no longer, and turning to her impulsively, in his most winning manner, he exclaimed :

"Look here, Ermyntrude—do make things easy for me—don't be hard on me. I've come to speak to you about Mrs Rivers."

"Hard on you," she repeated, freezing up more than ever. "Surely it is you who have been hard on me."

"What can you mean?" he asked blankly.

"Is it possible you do not realise that I blame you entirely for dear Bess's visit to Mrs Rivers," she said sternly, "a visit unauthorised by me, and to prevent which I had taken precautions of silence on the subject of my own visit to Old Queen Street?"

"But, Ermyntrude," he interrupted, "you surely——"

She put up her hand and silenced him.

"When you asked me to call on her," she continued, "and further, asked me to take Bess, I made it quite clear to you that I wished to know more about this stranger before I ran the risk of according to her the acquaintanceship of my young daughter. I had heard some rumours which caused me apprehension. I communicated my fears to you. Whatever course of action you yourself decided to adopt, the least you could have done for me and mine was to respect my fears. But you have always been sadly wanting in a fitting sense of responsibility, Edward. I do you the justice of believing that you have not wished to injure me . . ."

"Well, upon my soul, Ermyntrude," he interrupted again, "your tone is . . ."

Again she silenced him with an imperious gesture, and continued :

"And have not deliberately planned to weaken the value

of my authority and influence where my dear child is concerned. Nevertheless, you have always had an unfortunate effect on her temperament. I have tried to counteract it. Hitherto, I have more or less succeeded. But this time entire failure has overtaken me. You will probably think that I am exaggerating the significance of this visit. I wish indeed I were over-estimating it. But I recognise that it stands for a distinct act of hostility towards me. I do not mean to say that you urged it. I believe my dear child's word when she assures me that you knew nothing of it, as an intention or an act. But, being her uncle and her friend, you should have made it your business to have kept her away from that Old Queen Street household, until you could have assured me that there was no reason why she should not be made acquainted with it."

He had listened at the beginning with profound astonishment succeeded by indignation at her indictment of him, until it flashed across him that, in the main, she was right, and that she had cause for complaint against him. He was a generous-hearted man. It was not difficult to him to own up to a fault.

"My word, Ermyntrude," he said earnestly, "I never thought of such a thing. It never entered my head. You are right. I am an irresponsible sort of fellow. But in justice to myself, I must tell you that I had confided in Bess about my love and admiration for Harriet Rivers before—well—before I'd heard from you that—that there were any rumours. I don't say for certain that it would have made any difference. You see little Bess and I have always been such good friends, that it was natural enough that I should want to tell her I had fallen head over ears in love with a beautiful and splendid woman whom I knew she would like."

"I admit that from your point of view it was natural," Ermyntrude said, a little softened by his frank admission of irresponsibility. "But there was no need for you to have informed Bess that I had paid a preliminary visit to Mrs

Rivers. And no need to have told her your friend's address."

"I did not deliberately give her Mrs Rivers's address," he answered shortly. "It probably came out in the course of conversation. And as for secrecy, you didn't in your letter enjoin secrecy on me. How was I to know that you had kept Bess in the dark?"

Ermyntrude closed her eyes and opened them again.

"Your common sense should have guided you," she said gravely.

"We are not all gifted with your common sense, Ermyntrude," he said, still more shortly.

She closed her eyes once more. She was evidently struggling to be patient. And the shadow of real distress on her face made Bending feel penitent for his curtness of manner.

"Ermyntrude," he said kindly, "I'm really tremendously sorry if I have been the means of bringing about any discord. I hope you believe that."

"Yes, Edward," she answered, opening her eyes. "Of course I believe you are sorry. But it is too late now. The mischief is done. She has visited your friends, and come into relationship with influences which have immediately produced an extraordinary effect on her. My little Bess is a changed woman. I scarcely know her."

"But you speak as though she had been amongst criminals!" he cried, becoming angry suddenly. "It's not to be borne. And let me tell you, people don't change in a minute. There has generally been some silent process going on for months, if not years. It is unfair of you to attribute the cause to one incident only. Even if you think badly of my friends, I repeat it, it is unfair."

"Yes, it probably is," Ermyntrude said with a saintly smile. "I do not wish to be unfair. I wish to be fair. And I wish to be patient."

"For goodness sake don't be patient, Ermyntrude," he answered recklessly. "No one wants you to be patient. It's enough to drive one wild."

She started as though she had been struck.

"*Bess's words*," she said in a low strained voice. "You have taught her well, Edward."

"I've not taught her," he exclaimed, losing his temper. "We're Bendings, she and I, for better or for worse, and we look at things in the same way, and speak the same language. That's why we've always understood each other, and had a happy comradeship together which you've tried for years to break up. Oh, I know that, Ermyntrude. Don't suppose for a moment that I've not known that. But whatever you may think and have thought of me personally, Bess has never learnt any harm from me—never. She and I have honoured you together, just as Sebert honoured you, and I've paid you unfailingly the Bending traditional regard and homage which we all considered was your due. You've no right to say that I have taught her. Why, she has not a suspicion how your patience with me has riled me these many years. Long ago, in the old days, I used to say to Sebert: '*Good Lord, if only Ermyntrude wouldn't be patient with me. If only she'd round on me and call me to my face the disgrace of the family, then I should know where I was.*' That's the effect your patience had on me, and that's the effect it probably has on little Bess. I repeat it, we're Bendings, and we can't help being alike, any more than you can help being—being—cultured. But for all your culture, you've never understood your own daughter. You've taken it for granted that she's a counter-part, an echo of yourself. And now you're confronted with the unpleasant fact that she's not. And instead of accepting the fact, you turn round and blame other people for your own shortsightedness. Why don't you blame yourself? Why——"

"I do blame myself," she said quietly, and she covered her tearless face with her hands, and sat motionless.

He sprang up, his generous impulses of kindness stirred by her, as they had never been stirred before on her behalf, and his old habit of homage returning to him with a bound.

"Ermyntrude," he said, "forgive my rough words—of

course I know that my sort of character must have tried you fearfully—of course I know you could never have felt any real regard for a fellow like myself. But I do ask you to believe that I have never influenced Bess against you. Look here, you take my word for it, Ermytrude—it will all come right. She loves you, she adores you. Give her a long rope. All she wants is freedom. She'll come back to you quick enough. She's as loyal as Sebert. The long rope, Ermytrude, and then all will be well."

She uncovered her face, and stretched out her hand to him. She had been passing through several days of great suffering of spirit, and had been battling silently with surprise, indignation, humiliation and bitter grief over what she considered her dear child's ingratitude. These were the first words of comfort that had reached her; and the irony of life exacted that they should be spoken by the very person of whom she had ever cordially disapproved. But drowning human nature does not require that the character of the rescuer should be above reproach. *The rescue first—and then the criticism.* Ermytrude gratefully took the help offered her.

"Thank you, Edward. I do believe you," she said, and her hand remained resting in his. If he had looked up, he would have seen tears glistening in her eyes.

When at last she withdrew her hand, he went on eagerly, encouraged by this suspension of hostilities.

"And I want you also to believe that Bess could not possibly have got any harm from her visit—only good, Ermytrude, nothing but good. They are good women. You should have seen them these last weeks. Your heart would have gone out to them. There was a little forlorn friend of Margaret Tressider's brought unexpectedly to the house. She was out of her mind, and dying. She had been dismissed from her post as companion, and had wandered about Hampstead Heath all night. They found her and shipped her straight away to Mrs Rivers's house. And we nursed her—all of us—the women were quite wonderful in

their tenderness and kindness—and then, when the end came, we all laid her to rest in Hampstead Cemetery. We . . .”

“We,” Ermyntrude broke in.

“Yes,” Bending said still more eagerly; “that’s what I came to tell you, Ermyntrude. Harriet Rivers and I have thrown in our lots together, and we are going to be married.”

She stiffened up immediately.

“Then you are satisfied that there was no foundation in those rumours of which I warned you?” she asked severely.

“I have heard Harriet’s story direct from her,” he replied.

“You are thus able to assure me that there is no reason why Bess should not freely visit this lady and her friend,” she urged.

“No reason from my point of view, Ermyntrude,” he said.

“But from mine, Edward?” she insisted sternly. “From mine?”

He answered her question by another question.

“Is it,” he said slowly, “quite impossible for you to stand by your own sex, and believe that a woman, even as a man, has the right to pass on?”

She made no answer. She walked to the window, glanced out, and returned to the sofa. Her face looked as hard as granite.

“I gather,” she said, with added frigidity, “that the bank manager, Mr William Tressider, has been properly informed after all, and that Mrs Rivers is a divorced woman. Am I right?”

“Yes,” Bending answered scornfully. “Your private detective has ferreted out the truth for you. I hope you are content. Mrs Rivers is a divorced woman. The half-witted fiddle-maker you saw, is the step-brother of her dead lover. He was left in her charge, and she has looked after him with the single-minded devotion of which only a generous and unselfish heart is capable. Her husband, James Blackburn, divorced her when her lover died. That’s her history. Simple

enough, isn't it? And I've told her mine. That's not simple—alas—alas—no. But she forgave me my past, and I—I can't use the word 'forgive' where she is concerned—she is so much greater and nobler than I am—I only dare say I understand her past, and we're going forward together, she and I, with our faces turned happily and resolutely towards the future. And now you know all. There's nothing more to learn."

There was a flush on her face. His scorn had bitten into her; but she remained silent, and he waited on, hoping that she might speak some word which would ease the tension between them. And perhaps the word would have come in its own time, for Ermyntrode, in spite of her superiority, was capable, at rare intervals, of unexpected generosity of spirit. But the door opened, and the servant announced '*Mr William Tressider.*'

Bending started up from his chair, and turned to her in an access of scorn.

"Good-bye, Ermyntrode," he said. "You'll find you don't need your private detective now. There is nothing more to learn."

He stepped aside to allow the bank manager to pass into the room, and hurried out of the house, thankful that the interview was over, for better or for worse, furious with Ermyntrode for her private investigations, indignant with poor William Tressider for the correctness of his information, and angry with himself for allowing any annoyance to cloud his happiness, even for a passing moment. He was on the point of hailing a taximeter in the High Street, when he changed his mind and sauntered along to Kensington Gardens which he entered by the Broad Walk. He sat down on a bench near the Round Pond, took off his hat, aired his brain and drew long breaths of relief.

"Gad," he said, "Ermyntrode does take it out of a fellow. Much worse than pack-ice."

He leaned back, folded his arms, and was beginning to reacquaint himself and take a little interest in the ships, ducks

and dogs, when he heard his name called merrily, and looking back saw Bess smiling with pleasure at having discovered him. She, at least, was not depressed. The emancipation was agreeing with her. She seemed buoyant with youth and health, and wore a little reckless air which had the effect of making her ten times prettier than before. Uncle Ted laughed inwardly, but he was determined to try and be as responsible a human being as possible ; and he began his new rôle by pretending not to notice that she was flying her own flag, though he saluted it privately.

"Uncle Ted," she said, sinking down beside him, "what a good chance I happened to pass this way! I intended not to seek you out, but I didn't propose to cut you if I saw you! I suppose you have been to mother's, and I suppose you've been hearing about our differences of opinion. Do tell me."

"My dear, there's nothing to tell you except that your mother is suffering," he said gravely

"Yes, I know," she answered "In a way, I wish I were too. But I'm not at all miserable. Isn't it awful of me? It doesn't seem human, does it? But it's true, Uncle Ted. I feel hugely excited and uplifted."

"About what?" he asked still gravely, though he found it difficult to keep back a smile.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, laughing—"everything—life! You see, I really have been dull for a long time. But I've only just realised it. And suddenly I don't feel dull at all. I'm ready for anything! Adventures of any kind—the wildest and most impossible in any walk of life—except culture!"

"What has happened to you, Bess?" he asked. "Has your visit to my friends disturbed your mind? Your mother thinks it has."

"Yes, I know" she said impatiently. "Isn't it absurd? And so dear mother has had to learn from me in very distinct language that I've been upset for a long time. My visit to Mrs Rivers did not precipitate matters nearly so much

as our last cultured party. That really did the trick, Uncle Ted—that and something about Hughie. But I'm not going over that ground just now. I'll tell you some time later. I was quite frank to mother about our last cultured party. It was too awful for words. Not a sign of the real thing. Just a long-drawn-out pretence. And I am sure it was a great strain on mother herself. She had been reading up the most awful books, amongst others that holy horror I told you about, 'Radio-Active Transformations,' and she was worn out before the evening began."

"What on earth are they?" Uncle Ted put in. "I noticed that book and gave it a wide berth."

"I don't know what they are," Bess answered, "and I don't believe mother knows either. Anyway the sham of that evening was unbearable. After that I was determined to release myself from bondage, at any cost to anyone; and you can imagine what a tremendous relief it was to me to take the first step of emancipation and rush off to Mrs Rivers on my own hook. I never enjoyed anything so much in my life. What dears they are—both of them! And that wonderful fiddle-maker. I can't get him out of my head. He's the real thing, isn't he? But they're all real, aren't they? No pose about them. No strain. Oh, the relief, Uncle Ted. I felt reborn. All of them so attractive: Mrs Rivers so affectionate and gifted, Miss Tressider so bright, and that extraordinary man—a most exciting, interesting personality. I can't describe to you how he stimulated me. I want to restore fiddles—I want to make them—I want to find a bit of an old old Swiss châlet. I've written to some friends at Berne. Shan't I be proud if I can get an ancient old piece for him."

"A pity he is unhinged," Uncle Ted said somewhat deliberately. "Pity, isn't it? A loveable chap, gentle and harmless, but unhinged."

Bess was silent, and he went on:

"They take care of him in a most kindly fashion. I suppose lots of people would not be bothered with him, and would have shipped him off to a private asylum or a home of

some sort. But it is Mrs Rivers's great wish to make him happy. He was left in her charge, you know; and so he lives in her house, and comes and goes as he pleases. Yes, he's the real thing right enough. Not much pose about him. He wouldn't have shone at the cultured party, would he?"

"No," she said, laughing a little half-heartedly. "I can't fancy Mr Stilling in intimate conversation with our poet, Mr Theodore Theodore, for instance!"

And she added:

"I think it's all nonsense about his being half out of his mind. He's a genius. That's all. And therefore a little eccentric. But that only makes him more interesting. And that smile of his, Uncle Ted. I never saw such a lovely smile. It's really quite haunting."

"That's oil varnish. He is thinking of gums, resins and linseed oil when he smiles in that divine fashion," Bending said quaintly. "That gives him a tremendous pull over us other fellows. We can't all be meditating on varnish, you know. Poor old Hughie couldn't get up a smile like that to save his soul alive."

She laughed this time more easily, and coming nearer to her uncle, said with an amused smile of indulgence on her face:

"You dear old thing. I do believe you're trying to guide my footsteps. How funny!"

"You mustn't go and fall in love with a lunatic, Bess," he enjoined, looking straight into her face. "No sense in putting your emancipation to that use."

"Who told you I was falling in love with him?" she said severely, at once suspecting Hughie of having broken confidence with her, and resolving to pay him out.

"No one has told me you were falling in love with him," Uncle Ted answered truthfully. "But you're a buoyant young craft, dancing joyously on the open sea just at present, and a word of caution from an old comrade isn't valueless in the end. Moreover, I learnt that you'd had a very happy

time with him, and that because you were the owner of the Guarnierius, he had been at his very best and kindest with you. My shipmate told me this. She——”

“Your shipmate!” she exclaimed excitedly. “Oh, Uncle Ted, then you’re engaged to Mrs Rivers.”

He nodded.

“How perfectly splendid!” she went on. “Of course she loved you. I knew it directly we began to speak of you. You are right. She has shining eyes. They shone then, I can tell you!”

“And it was your visit, Bess, which brought things to a climax,” he said, forgetting suddenly all his duties as responsible relative. “I’m in the absurd position of being grateful that you went there, and annoyed with myself for not having prevented you from going.”

“Ah, mother has been lecturing you, I see,” she said. “But I told her distinctly you could not have prevented me. I was dead set on going, Uncle Ted, dead set on seeing the dear woman you loved. You needn’t have me on your conscience. As mother didn’t take me, I was fiercely determined to go on my own account. And did I really, really help to hurry on the love story? Well, I am proud. Mother can be as vexed as she pleases. I’m proud and glad beyond words. So there!”

“Thank you, Bess,” he laughed. “But, all the same, I wish we had not vexed and pained your mother.”

“It could not be helped,” Bess replied airily. “The trouble is that her horrid bank manager has been putting ideas into her head. She has learnt from him that there is some story about Mrs Rivers. She explained to me that she wished to be sure that this story was untrue before she introduced me. I simply laughed at her. I told her that nothing would make me believe anything against Mrs Rivers. She said I didn’t know the world, Uncle Ted. I answered again that nothing would make me believe anything against Mrs Rivers. And nothing will. Mother said that she would leave everything in abeyance until she had further definite

information from her bank manager. He was coming to-day. That's why I went out. I've always hated him. I can't believe he is Miss Tressider's brother. I believe he's a changeling!"

"He arrived as I was leaving," Uncle Ted said rising suddenly from the bench.

"Ah, then they're in consultation now," Bess said. "I'm thankful I'm well out of the way. Are you going? To Queen Anne's Mansions? I'll walk with you. But what's the matter? You're surely not worrying about Mr Tressider's 'definite information.' Definite information indeed! Nonsense! Mother is so easily misled. Do you know, I begin to think she has no judgment of her own."

He stood silently looking at her. He was confronted with a grave difficulty; and he could not decide how to meet it. Should Bess be left to learn bare relentless facts from her mother? Should she be allowed to base her ultimate judgment on knowledge untempered by a wider comprehension? Was this fair to her own generous nature? And was it fair to his shipmate? What ought he to do for the best? Ought he to take the chance of her mother keeping silent on the subject? No, Ermytrude would regard it as her duty to speak, having once begun. And even if she decided that it would be wiser to let the whole matter slide, Bess herself, in her present uplifted state of defiance, would demand to know. Then she would learn Harriet's story from the bank manager's version. That was not to be borne. He would tell her himself.

There had been heavy showers in the early part of the afternoon, and all the green things had won for themselves an added grace of Spring freshness. A burst of brilliant sunshine lit up the beautiful scenery. The tender grey London sky was jewelled, now with delicate rosy clouds, now with storm blue ones edged with gold, whilst others of Alpine whiteness ranged themselves as mountains and crowned their own peaks with Alpine glow. Outside the Palace grounds, the yellow Forsythia had broken into flower. Daffodils and Lent lilies were planning to carpet a grove of almond trees.

Down the long vista over the Round Pond and towards the Serpentine, one could see the faint shimmer of the mantle of the early year, various shades of green, and many tones of soft red blending to make the garment doubly beautiful. Very mysterious and far off stretched the distances. Were there continuous forests and woodlands beyond, were there meadows, streams, deep lanes, was there open country? Surely yes. Surely not a great town, where the spirit cannot free itself, but the country, the generous country, the great expanses, where the mind breaks through its limitations, with a song of gladness and infinite relief.

Uncle Ted touched his niece on the arm, and pointed to those distances. Things had ever been easier to him when he had space at his command.

"Let us go that way, Bess dear," he said, "over that grass, down that broad avenue. There is something I want to tell you."

CHAPTER XX

THE days went by, sunshine, rain, frost and warmth taking their turn in helping on or hindering the work of the early spring. The blossoms of the almond trees had enjoyed only a short reign of beauty, having been bespoiled of their charm by a heavy hurricane. But the chestnuts, daring as ever, had asserted themselves with more than usual bravura, and were not only spreading out their leaves, but were displaying here and there a few tiny stiff-backed signals of coming splendour. The Canadian poplars had almost finished dropping their fat red catkins; and their stately Lombardy relations were swaying to the wind, clad in a transparent veil of golden brown. In the parks, the wood pigeons were cooing sweetly, the jealous daffodils and hyacinths were striving their hardest to make the Londoner forget the memory of the crocuses, and the flowering currant bushes were in league with the soft red plum trees to divert the attention of nature lovers from the possibilities of the hawthorns and lilacs. Near Sparrowbird's grave in Hampstead Cemetery, a weeping willow had striven to pay an early tribute to the dead; and its feathery sprays of light and elegant foliage were moving in sympathetic rhythm. A larch tree hard by was showing her dainty tassels of delicate green. When Margaret came one morning she heard the welcome warbling of the little chiff-chaffs, and the love song of the skylark. Sparrowbird's stone had now been set up, and Margaret wished to see that the lettering of the record was correct. Instead of a line from the Scripture, she had chosen the words, '*Forget not, God, thy disappointed dead.*' Dr Edgar had entirely disapproved of them. He said they did not represent Sparrowbird's view of life. She would not

have ventured to complain indirectly to anyone, much less to God. He urged that it would be more suitable to use one of the old familiar ideas expressed in *Thy will be done*, or *Lead Kindly Light*, or *Abide with me*. But Margaret held fast to her own choice, even although Dr Edgar called her obstinately morbid.

"Sparrowbird was disappointed," she said, "and I am not going to have any insincere inscription put on her gravestone."

But when she saw the words in their plain black lettering, she realised that even in death, a wise reticence is more merciful than a bare truth. And after all, everyone was disappointed. Life always failed to yield this coveted boon to one, and that to another. Yet there was always compensation, something in the character if not in the circumstances which tended to a fair adjustment not perceptible to the outside world. Perhaps the doctor was right, and perhaps she had allowed herself to slip into a morbid state of mind. She determined to have the inscription altered.

The fact was that Sparrowbird's death had been a shock to Margaret, physically as well as mentally. Those words of distress 'not wanted, not wanted,' had never ceased to ring in her ears since she first heard them on that sad evening. They summed up her own life. No one had ever wanted her. To no one had she ever been of primary importance. For some, the glad look, the loving embrace, the tender understanding. For her, the half reluctant smile of greeting which faded before her back was turned. She lay awake at night, battling with these thoughts, but not overcoming them. She looked back through the long years, and knew that the only difference between Sparrowbird and herself was that Sparrowbird had lost her spirit at an early date, and she had kept hers more or less intact up to the present moment. Well, she must continue to keep it. She must go on pretending to enjoy the rôle of the disinterested spectator. She must get rid of that ridiculous

feeling of loneliness which had lately grown more insistent, encouraged by the spectacle of Harriet's happiness. Considering that she herself had striven to promote that happiness, it was unreasonable that she should allow it to sadden her. Of course she had lost Harriet. But she tried to persuade herself that she was too much of a philosopher to have reckoned on any long continuance of enjoyable conditions. She said to herself constantly, as a child repeating a lesson: '*I have had more than four happy years with Harriet and now they have come to an end. That's all.*' Perhaps the lesson was easier to repeat than to assimilate; but she knew that Time, the Great Healer, would lend his unfailing aid. She would drift into other channels, and discover something to help her to keep a fair amount of buoyancy of spirit for carrying on the interesting game of life. For the moment she could form no plans for the future. For a few months at least she would probably stay on in Old Queen Street to take care of Paul, whilst Harriet and the Captain were absent on their travels in Australia. After that she might perhaps go into partnership with her Polish photographer friend. All that would settle itself when the hour came.

She wandered about in many parts of London during the days following Sparrowbird's death. Dr Edgar went with her two or three times, for she had professed herself shocked at his ignorance of London, and offered to undertake his education. Bess also pleaded to be taken, and Margaret had added enjoyment in seeing the young girl's enthusiastic appreciation of things and places which hitherto had not been allowed their rightful interpretation and importance in her every-day life.

Town bird though Margaret was, she was passionately fond of nature, and she loved to watch the progress of the Spring in the parks and gardens, and old city church yards. She regarded St James's Park as her own special property, and took an eager proprietary interest in its trees, flowers and waterfowl, bestowing most of her attention on

the pelicans, which brought back memories of the lovely Pacific with its snowy surf. But she loved Hyde Park too, and did not neglect to watch the ferns uncurling their fronds in the dell, or the tulips beginning to make a brave show in the beds and pointing the finger of scorn at the hyacinths which had almost had their day. She loved the Temple Gardens also, and often made a pilgrimage, first to the Round Church, and afterwards to its sweet surroundings and quaint precincts. In Whitechapel she kept a watchful eye on the garden of St George in the East with its beehives and Nature Study Museum, and in Regent's Park she was one of the proud witnesses of the arrival of two hundred sheep from Aberdeen. Hampstead saw her frequently. She inherited some of the wealth of the blossoms of the fruit trees at Golder's Hill, and she patrolled the West Heath, encouraging the hawthorns, which she remembered were white, to bestir themselves and load their sweet branches with burdens of flowers white and massive as a mantle of Alpine snow. She sat in Judge's Walk and surveyed from there the stretches of wood and copse with their varying shades of green, relieved by delicate tones of red and enhanced in beauty by the sombreness of many trees which, even as ball room belles, preferred to make a later and more consequential entrance into the scenes of splendour. She strolled in 'Madeira' and enjoyed the beeches and the brave young bracken. She took tea at the Bull and Bush, and to prevent dear Jack Straw from becoming jealous, she lunched at his castle, and crossing the road, looked down on the bonny willows in the Vale of Heath, and up at St Paul's Cathedral seen clearly in the wonderful distance. She sauntered along the Spaniard's Road, and filled her lungs with the fine strong air, and her mind's eye with the boundless space. On her way back she generally halted near Windmill Hill, a corner of Hampstead as picturesque as Old Blois itself, and lived in by sweet presences. She changed her hunting-grounds with surprising fitfulness, and after a quiet stroll in nature's

bye-ways, she sought out London Bridge or Fleet Street, and jostled in the busy crowds of hurrying activity. She came home tired out, and sometimes rather cross. One day in Paul's workshop, she was quite ill-tempered when she found one of his gum brushes sticking to her embroidery. She scolded him.

"You are disagreeable," he said reproachfully, for he was never scolded.

"Am I, Paul?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered nodding his head gravely.

"I must try to reform," she said smiling.

"Yes, I should, if I were you," he replied, looking at her fixedly for a moment and then returning to his work. He was beginning to mark out the purfling on the back of his new fiddle, but after a few minutes of complete absorption in his task, he suddenly put down his purfling gauge and said :

"Harriet is happy, isn't she?"

"Yes," Margaret answered, "indeed she is."

"You are not happy," he said. "I know."

She was silent, and bent more industriously over her sticky embroidery.

"I know," he repeated gravely.

He seized a chisel and soon appeared to have forgotten, not only her unhappiness, but also her very presence in his workshop. But there remained in his queer brain a definite impression that all was not well with Margaret, and his concern showed itself in fragmentary efforts to be companionable, protective and generous. He did not like parting with his money, even in pennies; yet he bought her some evening newspapers one day, and on another occasion some acid drops, which he himself sucked with great enjoyment. One afternoon he asked her to go to Kew with him. He changed his mind at the station, and decided to go without her; still Margaret understood and valued the impulse of kindness. But it was over a most precious piece of maple wood that he eclipsed himself in his attempts to comfort and cheer her. He had treasured up this particular slab for the

back of his next fiddle, and had spoken of it with the greatest enthusiasm and delight. It had no knots or cracks. It was neither 'too hard nor too soft. It was perfection. One morning he rushed downstairs carrying it under his arm, nearly knocked over poor Quong, who smiled blandly as usual, and dashed into the drawing-room where Margaret was arranging a large bowl of yellow irises.

"I'm going to give this to you, Margaret," he said. "You shall have it. The best piece of wood I've ever had. You shall have it."

"Thank you, Paul," she said, touched as ever by his obvious wish to hearten her. "It is good of you. I shall value it tremendously."

He nodded and darted off again. A few hours afterwards she found him happily engaged in working at this same piece of wood with his carving gouge. But she was helped by his unmistakable promptings to be thoughtful on her behalf; and looking back afterwards, she realised how much she owed to the old sign-post during those first days of desolation and sadness. He had done for her all that it lay in his power to do. The impulses that died at their birth, the imperfect expressions of real, though incontinuous sympathy were the best he had to offer within his limits. He offered them, and no one could do more.

Once he surprised her by an unprovoked reference to Sparrowbird, whom she thought he had entirely forgotten.

"That woman was out of her mind," he said thoughtfully. "She believed she wasn't wanted."

And once he spoke of Dr Edgar.

"He has clever hands," he said. "He would make a good fiddle, I think. I shouldn't mind teaching him. I noticed how well he used the purfling chisel, Margaret. I like him."

"He has to have clever hands, being a surgeon, you know," Margaret remarked.

"What a pity he is a surgeon," Paul said, shaking his head. "Much better to be a fiddle-maker. I shouldn't

mind teaching him. But I couldn't tell him the secret of my varnish. That's not for every one, is it?"

"No," she answered gravely.

He was struck by the graveness of her answer, and added at once :

"Do you want me to tell him, Margaret? If you wanted me to tell him, perhaps I would."

"No, no, Paul," she said gently "There's no need for you to do that"

"Ah, that's a good thing," he said with a sigh of relief. "But you see, if you really wished . . ."

He stared at her intently, but soon took up his tools, his mind wandering off once more to its own familiar regions. But he evidently had her welfare at heart, for later in the day he went to Harriet and said in his queer, abrupt way :

"You're very happy, aren't you?"

"Yes, yes, Paul," she answered joyously "Indeed I am"

"Margaret isn't," he said He stood for a moment, his hand to his head, his invariable position when he was struggling with his fickle brain He disappeared

Harriet understood that he had meant to tell her that Margaret must not be forgotten Not that Harriet had forgotten her still the finest love is sometimes selfish, and builds up its barriers through which none may pass. But helped thus by Paul, she realised suddenly that her faithful friend stood alone in that desolate outer court, where the sad cry goes up, Sparrowbird's cry. '*Not wanted—not wanted.*' Harriet hastened to fetch her in. She poured ointment, she strewed flowers, she sounded a great vibrating chord to dull and deaden those echoing words ; and Margaret raised her head and smiled again. She believed her common sense had come to her aid, and never guessed at the loving concern which hid its activity, and yet did its work with unflinching persistence. Finally one of Harriet's tornadoes helped on Margaret's convalescence.

"Ah," said Margaret to herself, "the good old familiar times are not over yet. Now I know where I am. Now I

feel myself again. My common sense and her tornado have done the trick for me."

And when Harriet came as usual to say that she was 'heap sorry' for her outburst of temper, she laughed softly and answered:

"Don't apologise, Harriet. You've healed me."

"Do you mean that you are going to be glad to get rid of me?" Harriet asked, ashamed as a little child.

"No," Margaret answered smiling. "I mean that I am so happy to realise I have you still, Harriet."

And Harriet, penitent though she was, laughed to herself and thought: "How funny! My temper rather than my tenderness has made her realise that she has me still."

She did not reflect that she had taken every means, known only to a generous heart, of disguising her tenderness; whereas her temper had retained its usual recognisable characteristics. But she told the Captain in secret.

"I had an awful fit of temper this morning," she confessed, "and it seems to have had a most cheering effect on Margaret. She says it has made her realise that she has not lost me yet."

"Begad, shipmate," he laughed lovingly, "Margaret is right. You don't make any plans to shield yourself, and I love you for it! And so you had an awful fit of temper! And she recognised an old, old, unchanged friend, and was delighted! That's it, isn't it?"

"Yes," she answered. "But I don't see why you should laugh. You have to know about my temper sooner or later, Edward. Margaret has always said it was pretty bad."

"And yet she welcomed it joyfully," he put in, laughing again.

"Well, just because it was an old friend, as you say," Harriet answered simply.

He kissed her as a lover, and stretched out his hand as a comrade.

"Shipmate, I appreciate you from the bottom of my heart," he said. "A breeze now and again won't hurt

either of us. And apparently Margaret, instead of being knocked overboard, has gained the upper deck."

Margaret had gained the upper deck and found a firm footing for the moment. Her good spirits began to reassert themselves, and she went about the house singing 'L'Heureux Vagabond.' Quong was pleased, and he confided to Harriet: "Miss Tlessider heap happy. She sing her little song." Paul was also relieved in his queer way. He said to Harriet:

"Margaret isn't disagreeable any more. We'll take her to the Zoo, shall we?"

"Yes, yes!" Harriet answered, delightedly. "Let's go and see the baby giraffe, Paul."

So they started off together to the Zoo which they all loved, and for once Paul did not leave them in the lurch. He seemed proud to escort them, and they were proud to be taken care of by the old sign-post. His face wore that charming and mysterious smile of his; and on this occasion it was not called forth by varnish only. No, in some vague way he realised that he had borne his part in helping to restore Margaret to happiness, and he was now reaping the reward of his anxiety and concern. No doubt his work haunted him as usual, but it only claimed the uppermost place in his thoughts when they arrived back at Old Queen Street. Then he said:

"Terribly anxious to see how that fiddle has taken its second coat of varnish."

And directly the door was opened, he vanished into his own regions, and they saw no more of him that day. But the incident had cheered them both, for they were always absurdly delighted when Paul was at his best. Harriet told the story to Bending that evening, and he remarked:

"I'm glad little Bess didn't go with you, shipmate."

"Why, dear?" she asked anxiously. "Would her mother have been annoyed?"

"Bess, being on the warpath, goes where she likes, apparently," Bending said laughing. "Mrs Ermytrude

knows she comes here and goes out with you both. No, I wasn't thinking of that. I was only thinking that I rather hoped she'd get some cold water thrown in her face about Paul. Better for her. You know she pretends to believe he is—well—well—as sane as Dr Edgar is, for instance."

"Oh, oh, excuse me," put in Margaret. "Dr Edgar is not as sane as he was, I'm thankful to say. He's beginning to show signs of aberration."

"Well then, as sane as I am," laughed Bending. "Bess has got this idea into her head, and there it will stay until something occurs to drive it out. I wish you could both help in this difficulty. You see, Paul represents for her 'the real thing.' You all do, for the matter of that; but his queer individuality makes special appeal, in the excitement of her rebellion. I don't want to see her faithful Hughie thrown overboard just for a passing enthusiasm. Hughie's a good sort, and we must guard his interests."

"Of course we'll guard his interests," Harriet said eagerly. "But our best plan is to do nothing. We must leave it to chance. One can't arrange for Paul."

"That's about the only wise thing I've ever heard Harriet say," Margaret remarked teasingly. "It's quite true. One can't make plans where Paul is concerned. But some day—perhaps when we least expect it—he won't be at his best; and then Bess will understand clearly. She probably understands now, in her heart of hearts. Still, a dash of cold water won't do any harm. And it will come."

"And meanwhile I'll keep a look-out from the crow's nest," Harriet said lovingly. "Oh, I can be very wise sometimes. You see, even Margaret owns that."

"What a fool Ermytrude is not to come and ask for the friendship of both of you," Bending said suddenly. "When I look at you, shipmate, and you, Margaret, and think of her, I could—well, I could——"

He broke off. He dared not trust himself to speak to them of Ermytrude. But Margaret cheered him.

"Don't worry about Mrs Ermytrude," she said gaily.

"Some day she'll find out what entrancing people we are—especially myself! As the whale-lady said of her whale island, if you remember, truth prevails in the end!"

Yes, Margaret had certainly recovered her spirits, and one morning a letter from Brother William asking her to meet him at Aunt Caroline's put the finishing touch to her restoration.

"It has struck me that you may refuse," he wrote. "I trust, however, that your sense of Christian duty to an aged relative (and, I may add, a proper regard for your own interest) will induce you to overcome your reluctance. I admit that the circumstances of Miss Sparrow's death were unfortunate. But she is at rest, and in God's care. She has passed away from the changes and chances of this difficult life. But Aunt Caroline is still with us, and we owe it to her to see that all is well with her. At present she is far from being happy and peaceful. The last nurse-companion is a failure. There have been three before this one. Dr Edgar has written to say that he is giving up part of his practice, and begs to take his leave. Aunt Caroline is naturally much disturbed. She asks for you. I understand that she has some suggestion to make to you. I shall be at Mecklenburgh Square at six o'clock, and shall wait for you until the half hour."

At a quarter past six Margaret stood outside Aunt Caroline's house, and glanced across the Square where Sparrowbird had so often enjoyed a few stolen moments of peace under the shade of the great plane trees during the hot summer months. Everyone of those trees had been dear to her faithful heart. She had never admitted that there were finer specimens anywhere in the world than those in Mecklenburgh Square. She had noted when they shed their bark, she had counted their tasselled catkins. she had watched with lynx eyes for the first sign of new buds, and rejoiced in their belated shimmer of green. Many a time they had eased her burdened spirit. Margaret remembered this, and her heart hardened towards the ruthless old woman who had taken all joy and

hope out of that poor little life, and given nothing in return—not even a recognised time of leisure to spend beneath those plane trees across the road.

The sour-visaged Rebecca opened the door to her, and in answer to Margaret's enquiries, told her that Miss Benbow was not well, that the last nurse-companion left the previous night, and that Mr William Tressider was in the dining-room. Margaret found Brother William reading the *Golfing Record*.

"Ah, you have come, Margaret," he said, in his most pompous tone of voice. "Pray sit down."

"Thank you," she answered, nodding with sufficient friendliness.

"I had the belief that my letter would induce you to come," William began with a subtle smile.

"Well, you had a wrong belief, William," Margaret said lightly. "Your letter in itself would not have had the least effect on me. But I was so amused to learn that Dr Edgar had given Aunt Caroline the sack, that I could not resist coming to survey the situation."

"Aunt Caroline the sack," William repeated frigidly. "I fail to understand you. Explain yourself."

"There is nothing to explain," she said. "It is all quite clear. Dr Edgar knew as well as I that Aunt Caroline had killed Miss Sparrow. It isn't likely that he would wish to continue attending a murderess."

"Your language is most exaggerated," William said frowning.

"Probably it is, technically," Margaret answered indifferently. "But not in essence. Many a poor unfortunate wretch is 'doing time' either in this world or the next for a lesser crime than Aunt Caroline's."

"I admit that the circumstances were unfortunate," William remarked after a pause. "But, as I observed in my letter, Miss Sparrow is at rest and in God's care."

"Well, it is a comfort to think that anyone's care is better than Aunt Caroline's," Margaret said.

William made no answer. He turned over the pages of his *Golfing Record*, blew his nose pompously and at last said ;

"I think we may now pass on to consider another aspect of the situation. Aunt Caroline is needing another companion. She has already had three who—who——"

"Who have given her the sack," Margaret suggested sweetly.

"Who justly considered themselves unsuitable for the post, William amended severely. "Aunt Caroline has a suggestion to make to you."

"What does she want me to do? Come and be companion to her?" Margaret asked ironically.

"Yes," said William solemnly.

Margaret laughed.

"I'm so glad I was born!" she exclaimed. "I wouldn't have missed this for anything. It is funny!"

"I see nothing funny in it," William remarked a little uneasily. "I see a good business offer, as you will learn. I have represented to Aunt Caroline that the old order of things has changed. She is prepared to offer you two-thirds of your present salary—and by the way I understand that Mrs Rivers is to be married shortly—two-thirds of your present salary—and a handsome provision for life."

"How much, do you know?" Margaret asked with great amiability.

"I believe I can even tell you that," William answered encouraged by her complacent manner, and referring to his note-book. "Yes, her shares in the Buenos Ayres and Rosario, the Great Western and the Canadian and Pacific, the Grand Trunk, and the British Linen Co. Nearly five thousand pounds. You must admit that it is a generous offer, Margaret."

Margaret, who had turned rather pale, made no remark for some time, and eventually astonished Brother William by asking a question which had no bearing on the money.

"And how did you find out that Mrs Rivers was going to be married?" she enquired.

"Pardon me, that is my own private concern," William answered pompously. "Bank managers, even as doctor

lawyers and clergymen learn many facts in the ordinary course of business."

"Well, I suppose I must go and see Aunt Caroline," she said rising from her chair. "Five thousand pounds. It's a good sum, William, isn't it? She must want me badly. She always liked me. Poor old thing. I suppose she realises she is up a gum tree. Ah, that reminds me of trees! Do you see those planes there? Sparrowbird had to steal into the square, like an escaped convict snatching a few precious moments of freedom. It is well that you impressed on Aunt Caroline that the old order of things has changed."

"She will accept the post," William reflected when he was left alone. "No one could withstand such an offer. It was easy to see that she yielded at once."

Margaret mounted the stairs and knocked at the inner door of the boudoir. She was told to come in. She found the old lady sitting at her writing-desk, bending over some papers. A document, suspiciously like a Will, lay on the chair hard by. The gold-headed cane had fallen to the ground. Margaret picked it up, and placed it near the Will. She noticed that Aunt Caroline looked thoroughly wretched and bewildered. Some of her self-contained dignity had departed from her. She gave the impression of being a lonely old woman bereft of the support and care to which she had ever been accustomed.

She put down her pen and looked at Margaret. The pen rolled off the desk. Sparrowbird would have sprung up from the other end of the room to have restored it to her tyrant. Margaret contemplated it, and in due time, at her leisure, stooped down and gave it back casually to its owner. A ghost of a smile flickered across Aunt Caroline's face.

"Thank you," she said. "I believe that is the new order of things. Thank you. Thank you."

"There had to be a new order of things," Margaret answered gravely, though she felt inclined to smile. "The age demands it."

"Yes, evidently," Aunt Caroline said with some attempt at meekness

"I understand that the nurse companions were of that opinion," Margaret ventured

"Yes," replied Aunt Caroline, her face twitching a little "All of them"

There was a long pause, and then Aunt Caroline who had been fingering her papers, said

"I shall have to find a new doctor"

"Yes, so I learn from William," Margaret answered "That will not be difficult I here are thousands of them"

"Yes," returned Aunt Caroline

There was another spell of silence, and at last Aunt Caroline turned to her niece and began business

"Well," she said, "you have heard my offer, Margaret You can have an agreement, if you like, and there is my Will, to which I have already added a codicil in your favour"

Margaret shook her head

"It isn't enough," she replied with quiet deliberateness "I cannot accept your offer"

"Not enough?" her aunt repeated, with an access of her old imperiousness "Not enough? Two hundred and sixty a year, and £5000 down after my death Not enough? Why, you must be mad"

"No, that's just it I am sane," Margaret answered with a quiet smile. "If I were mad, I should accept your offer. But I repeat myself It is not enough for me"

"Pray, may I ask what sum you would consider enough?" Aunt Caroline enquired sarcastically

"There is no sum large enough to buy me, Aunt Caroline," Margaret said gravely. "My freedom, my self respect, the play of my own individuality, my emotions, my views of life, my good spirits—I value these They are priceless. I cannot sacrifice them to you for money"

"You would not have to sacrifice them," the old lady replied with an eagerness which had something pitiful in it. "I'm not a fool. I know things have to be different. I

shall be different. I shall be modern. I shall alter my way of living. I'm eighty, but my brain is a good deal stronger than some of your modern brains. We can go to concerts, to theatres, to Suffrage Meetings—I tell you—you shouldn't have a dull life. I'm tired of being dull myself. I won't be exacting. I'll even get rid of the dog. I've always liked you. I've always enjoyed fighting with you. I know you don't like me. Do you remember how you wouldn't accept the watch I bought for you? I have that watch still. I said to myself, 'Well, at least no one else shall have it.' Once I thought of giving it to Miss Sparrow, and then I changed my mind. I'm sorry about Miss Sparrow. I never meant to harm her. Her death has quite upset me. But she was always stupid. Why did she go wandering over the Heath at night? I wasn't to know, when I gave her notice, that she would behave in that ridiculous manner. I suppose you will do me the justice to allow me that much. I repeat it. I'm sorry about her. I never meant to harm her."

She paused a moment, and as Margaret was silent, she went on:

"You like fine dresses, and they suit you. You've become accustomed to having them now. How are you going to do without them? Your employer is to be married, I hear. What are your plans for yourself? Why not come to me? I shall be different, Margaret. I understand perfectly that I have to be different, whether I like it or not. You can have as much freedom as you wish—I won't interfere with you. I want you. We'll hold Suffrage Meetings in my very drawing-room.

"Aunt Caroline, I cannot come to live with you," Margaret said gently. "It is impossible. To begin with, you can't change. Yet I think you can, because for the moment you are in a chastened mood and you have lost your bearings. But when you had found them again, you would be just the same as ever, Aunt Caroline—tyrannical and annihilating. And even if you could change, I shouldn't care to be the one

to step into Miss Sparrow's place and have the benefits and privileges which you denied to her. That would be no happiness to me—only a sorrow and a reproach. No, it would need a stranger. Nothing that you urge, tempts me. Yes, I like smart dresses. I should hate to be without them now. I like to feel I've plenty of money in my cash box. I've taken very kindly to luxury and easy circumstances. Mrs Rivers is to be married. William, as ever, is right. What am I going to do with myself? I don't know and don't care greatly. But this much I know I would rather be poor and shabby, than dependent on your whims. As for Miss Sparrow's illness and death, I dare not trust myself to speak on that subject to you. I still shudder when I think of that long sad search over the Heath. The whole thing ploughed into me. I was fond of her, and tried to make her rebel against you. She couldn't. She hadn't it in her. But her type is dying out. In two or three more generations there won't be any more Sparrowbirds. I wish I could be here to throw my cap in the air and shout, 'Hurrah for the new order of things.'"

She ceased, and after a long interval of silence Aunt Caroline said :

"Then you refuse my offer?"

"Yes," Margaret answered. "But I wish to tell you, Aunt Caroline, that if I had loved you, I would have been impelled to come and stand by you, and there would not then have been any question of paying £5000 for the purchase of my individuality."

"Well, good-bye," Aunt Caroline said waving her hand with her old imperiousness. "There is no need to prolong this conversation. You can tell William to step up. You certainly do pay for good dressing, Margaret. You were an ugly girl. You are not ugly now. Good-bye. I don't bear you any grudge. Perhaps that is only because I am in a chastened mood, and am trying to adjust my mind to this wonderful new order of things. Oh, I am not a fool. I see it has to come, and most uncomfortable it is going to be for

me and my type. But I suppose you would say that my type has to die out."

Margaret laughed as she saw the grim smile on the old tyrant's face. She was moved to admiration by the way in which Aunt Caroline had accepted defeat.

"Good-bye, Aunt Caroline," she said brightly. "I am glad you bear me no grudge. You should not bear me any. You have William the Perfect at your beck and call. I'll send him up to you now."

She took the left hand which Aunt Caroline held towards her, pressed it lightly, picked up the gold-headed cane which had once more fallen to the ground, and left the room. She paused on the landing. It seemed strange not to see Sparrowbird stealing about in her timid way. It was a desolate house, desolate even for that selfish old woman whom no one loved. Would she have been a better human product if anyone had loved her? No, she would probably have trampled on the most chivalrous love. Margaret went slowly down the stairs. When she reached the last step, she suddenly recalled the incident of the watch—the watch bought thirty years ago and still unclaimed by the person for whom it had been bought. Acting on impulse, she returned to Aunt Caroline's door, knocked, went into the room and found the old woman leaning back in her chair, her eyes closed, her hands lying listless in her lap. The dog was scratching at her dress, trying to attract her attention, but she took no notice of it.

"Aunt Caroline," Margaret began.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" Miss Benbow said opening her eyes. "I thought it was William. I suppose you've come back to tell me that you've changed your mind."

"No, I shall never change my mind about that," Margaret answered with a quiet smile. "But I want to ask a favour of you—a very great favour."

Aunt Caroline turned to Margaret, and stared at her in frank surprise.

"You have never before asked anything of me," she said :

grimly. "You must want something pretty badly to part with your pride in this manner."

"Yes, I do want something badly," Margaret said looking steadily on the ground. "Aunt Caroline, I want that watch which has never been given to anyone else."

A flush came over the ashen old face, and a tenderness into the steely old eyes. Her mouth twitched a little. Her hands trembled. She fumbled at her keys, and found the one she wanted.

"This is the key of the teak cupboard in my bedroom," she said. "You will find an old satinwood box on the second shelf, at the back."

Margaret brought the box, and bent over her as she opened it and took out a little flat Geneva watch, beautifully chased, and of the finest gold. There was a long delicate chain attached to it, and without speaking a word, she signed to Margaret to come nearer, so that she might herself slip it over her niece's head. Having done this she signed to her to go. But when Margaret had reached the door, the old woman suddenly said in a trembling voice which she tried bravely to control:

"Well, I'm glad you have it at last. It has waited here for nearly thirty years. No, you needn't thank me. Perhaps I have to thank you. Good-bye. Send William up."

William arrived, his face beaming with satisfaction, and his manner more pompously important than ever.

"My dear Aunt," he began, "I told you that I felt sure I could persuade her. I saw from the very beginning of our interview downstairs that she would accept your most munificent offer. Indeed, who would be able to refuse it? My experience of men and money justified me in believing that her acceptance was a foregone conclusion. Still I own that I am most anxious to learn how you approached the subject. Margaret gave me no information. She told me that I should hear all details from you. I gathered from the softened expression on her face that things had gone well. You are now saved from all future complications, Margaret."

is capable—very capable. “I recognised that years ago. Indeed I may say——”

Aunt Caroline waved her hand, and reduced William to instant silence.

“She has refused my offer, William,” she said. “Don’t go on in that inflated fashion. Evidently you are not always right. Anyway, your advice on this occasion has made me make a fool of myself.”

“Refused your offer?” William repeated aghast. “Oh, impossible. I can’t believe it.”

“Well, you needn’t,” Aunt Caroline remarked crossly. “Here, give me the Will. It must be locked up with the other papers.”

“It is impossible for me to believe that Margaret has been ungrateful enough to refuse your generous offer,” William said. “She must be mad. That is the only excuse I can offer for her. And as for my advice, Aunt Caroline, it was based on common sense, and a knowledge of human nature. You will admit that.”

“Common sense and a knowledge of human nature don’t always work out,” she answered grimly. “Give me the Will. I’ll lock it up. She says she isn’t mad. She says she’s sane. And perhaps she is.”

“But you will surely wish to have the codicil altered,” William suggested. “You will surely wish to have the five thousand pounds restored to the charities for which it was originally intended.”

Aunt Caroline glared at him, and took the Will rather roughly from him.

“The codicil shall remain unaltered as long as I choose,” she said imperiously. “And if you say another word about it, William, I shall add another codicil which will affect you personally. I’ve had quite enough of your advice for the present.”

William turned the whites of his eyes heavenwards, and with remarkable mental agility guided the conversation into safer seas.

CHAPTER XXI

ERMYNTRUDE felt ill. Bess's rebellion had upset her nervous system. She found herself rising with difficulty to the demands which she believed life made on her. When Mr Theodore Theodore, the poet, called one afternoon with an ode to the West Wind which was to outrival all the Odes to any of the winds, she tried her conscientious best to listen to and appreciate this undoubted work of genius. But her hearing was more troublesome than usual, and she realised with some concern that it was a matter of indifference to her whether the wind invoked were North, South, East or West. She called it by its wrong name, too. She said :

"Yes, that is indeed a fine description of the North wind."

"The North," the poet exclaimed with injured surprise "You mean the West."

"Yes, of course," Ermyntrude replied with one of her reassuringly intellectual smiles. "How curious these slips of the tongue are. And now I should like to hear it again from the beginning. The opening stanza of the invocation struck me as amazingly forcible."

When Mr Theodore Theodore had departed, she opened her journal and made the following entries :

"My hearing more defective these last days. Must go and consult Dr Edgar without delay. Not feeling myself. My brain lacking in its usual serenity and comprehensiveness. Influenza? No, I think not. Bess. The long rope. Hughie. No chess. Edward. Private detective—a hurtful thrust. Must in fairness to myself make Edward understand that Mr Tressider scarcely went out of his way to corroborate

rumours. Very different from private detective work. Position as bank manager offering him opportunities closed to other people. Must carry out my idea of having musical 'At Home' shortly. Dear Bess always enjoys that kind of party. Perhaps we have had too many formal gatherings of choice spirits lately. Shall ask dear child to help me with invitations, and to suggest names of artistes. About Mrs Rivers, have determined . . ."

Ermyntrude had not the spirit to complete the list of comments which usually guided her conduct. Bess's rebellion had been a real shock to her, and the girl's continued attitude of quiet defiance had convinced her that the old dear's uninterrupted acquiescence were passed for ever. Like Aunt Caroline, Ermyntrude was brought face to face with the stern fact that there was a new order of things. She realised this definitely on the occasion when she told Bess that her enquiries concerning Mrs Rivers had been proved to be unsatisfactory, and that she desired the acquaintanceship to come to an immediate end. Bess's words and manner still haunted her.

"Mother dear," she had said deliberately, "I know Mrs Rivers's history. I suppose we have all made mistakes in some way or other. Probably even you have. I am very sorry I cannot promise you to give up my acquaintanceship with Mrs Rivers and Miss Tressider. I like them both exceedingly, and I love going to Old Queen Street. I want you to understand this clearly, mother. I don't wish to deceive you, but don't intend to obey you."

"It is for your own good, Bess," she had answered, "it is for your own good that I wish you to stay away."

"From your point of view," Bess had replied, 'not from mine.' From my point of view I gain in every way. One can breathe in Mrs Rivers's house. One has to breathe to live."

Hadn't Bess been able to breathe all these years? Time after time Ermyntrude asked herself this question, and time after time she assured herself that she had given her dear child freedom of thought, freedom of action, free play

of individuality. She had ever prided herself on being modern. She examined herself with inquisitorial severity and decided that she was blameless in this respect, although it was possible that errors of judgment might have misled her in other directions. The accusation brought against her of absorbing everyone, including Hughie, was, of course, ridiculous, though wounding to her inner dignity. That was just the one thing she did not do: absorb people. Ever since she could remember, she had taken a sympathetic interest in those with whom she came in contact, an interest from which all traces of self had been conscientiously eliminated. Those games of chess, for instance, had been started to set Hughie at his ease, and encourage a pleasant feeling of domesticity. Those long conversations on conveyancing had been intended to bring out the best of his mental powers. She had derived an immense pleasure from the belief that she, dear Bess's mother, was influencing the mind and character of dear Bess's future husband. She must not allow herself to dwell on this exceedingly painful, though absurd part of her child's outburst of temper. She was glad that she had controlled herself sufficiently to refrain from all reference to Hughie. She had not shown the faintest sign that her pride was mortified by Bess's words: "*I would far rather give him up to you, mother.*" No one knew that they rang in her ears discordantly day and night. *Give him up to her.* And this was the reward which her maternal concern had reaped? Well, she must be patient. That was what mothers had to be—patient. Edward had been scornful of the word patience. Bess also. Nevertheless, Edward himself had recommended the 'long rope.' And what was the 'long rope' except patience—infinite patience? Absolutely the same idea expressed differently. Ah, perhaps carried out differently. Yes, probably with a subtle difference which her mind, accustomed to subtle processes of thought, would easily grasp, when once her brain, for the moment disturbed, had regained its wonted serenity. Meanwhile she would not interfere with Bess.

Opposition would only make matters worse. And she had decided to give a musical 'At Home,' which she hoped would be a bond of renewed union between herself and her dear child. She would try to make it a brilliant success. Bess should choose her own friends. Miss Tressider and Mrs Rivers were, of course, out of the question, but with the exception of these two, Bess should invite anyone she wished. It was a pity that Mrs Rivers could not be invited, for her playing was noble, uplifting, she would never forget her magnificent rendering of that Chopin Nocturne. But Mr William Tressider's report and Edward's entire confirmation of it had closed the door of Melbury Road to the Westminster household. She owned that she had for the moment no influence over her daughter's conduct. But at least she was mistress in her own house. And the doors were closed. Now she must try and find some means of impressing on Edward that he was making a mesalliance which might injure his career and ruin his prospects. It was her duty to uphold the honour of the Bending family, and she would not swerve from her duty, even though Edward continued angry with her, and had behaved towards her in a wholly unsuitable, nay more, in a wholly uncourtous fashion. Yet she must bear in mind that given the circumstances, it was natural enough that he should have worked himself into a state of extreme irritation. The long rope for him, too. Yes, yes, she began to understand.

She was sitting on the sofa in her favourite corner, with the little table containing her hyper intellectual books drawn close beside her. Her eye rested for a moment on 'Radio-Active Transformations', but she did not yield to a dutiful impulse to open and study this perplexing volume. She chose instead her address book, and was beginning to write out a first list of names for the musical 'At Home,' when Bess arrived on the scene, looking fresher than ever, and always with that reckless and defiant little air which added an unspeakable charm to her pretty face.

"Ah, dear child, I was wanting to see you," Ermynt^rude

began. "I wish to consult with you about the 'At Home.'"

"Yes, and I was wanting to talk to you on that very subject," Bess said, sitting down beside her. "Mother, I've been thinking about things, and I've come to the conclusion that it is perfectly awful that we don't pay our artistes."

"Pay the artistes," Ermyntrude said aghast, closing her address book.

"Yes," Bess answered nodding her head.

"But it is surely enough for them to have the opportunity of performing in this house," Ermyntrude remarked severely. "It opens other doors to them. They realise the advantage."

"Other doors into other houses where also they don't get paid, poor things," Bess remarked. "What on earth do they live on, I wonder? They can't possibly live on antimacassars and piano covers."

Ermyntrude flushed slightly. In special instances her usual gift was a piano cover or antimacassar; in ordinary cases nothing.

"They need not accept the invitation, Bess," she remarked after a pause.

"No, of course they needn't," Bess replied. "But I suppose they come, hoping against hope. Anyway, Mother, I've brought you twenty guineas. Here they are. Fifteen guineas you gave me for a new evening dress, which I can very well do without, and five guineas I've saved up for the Wagner Cycle. Twenty guineas can pay the pianist or violinist, and I thought you might perhaps be induced to follow my example and to find the money for the singers."

Ermyntrude took the four five-pound notes and the one sovereign, and laid them abstractedly on the top of 'Radio-Active Transformations.' Every day Bess was presenting her with a fresh problem of most unexpected intricacy.

"This is a new idea to me, Bess," she said eventually. "I must think it out."

"Do, Mother," Bess answered cheerfully. "And when you have done so, I feel sure you will agree with me that we

ought not to go on making use of these people without paying them their fees. I've always been vaguely uneasy about it. But I was out with Miss Tressider yesterday, seeing the beehives in the Nature Study Garden in St George-in-the-East. And we spoke on this subject. And since hearing what she had to say, I've become definitely uneasy. Miss Tressider has knocked about a good deal, and she knows all sorts and conditions of people. She has made me understand the dishonourableness of it. She says the duchesses are the worst. At least, Mother, don't let us be as bad as the duchesses."

Ermyntrude flushed again, but she remembered the long rope and kept herself well under control. The beehives bewildered her a little, but she banished them from her brain: only momentarily however.

"I will give this matter my careful attention, Bess," she said kindly. "And now for the invitations. I wish you to ask any friends you choose."

"Do you really mean that, Mother?" Bess asked.

"Why, certainly," Ermyntrude answered graciously.

"Then, of course, I would like to ask Mrs Rivers and Miss Tressider," Bess said. "You know I am so very much interested in them."

"It is not possible for me to invite those two ladies, Bess," Ermyntrude said.

"You gave me my choice," Bess replied airily.

"Yes, but I could not foresee that your choice would be confined to people whom you know to be unacceptable to me, Bess," her mother answered. "I cannot, and do not wish to interfere with your actions. You have chosen to oppose my authority. Let that pass. But I can at least close my doors to undesirable acquaintances."

"I'm sorry, Mother," Bess said, getting up from the sofa. "You see I have no other personal friends who are not also your personal friends. Up to now I've always had to follow your lead. Those two are the only people whom I've learnt to know off my own bat, and they are people after my own

heart, the real thing. But now I've once begun, perhaps I shall some day find some others of whom you will approve. Let us hope so. Never mind about that. Only do think over the money question. I hold to that more than anything."

She hastened to the door and was gone, leaving Ermyntrude to gather herself together in the best way she could. This interview, however, put the finishing touch to her indisposition. Bess's suggestion that she should pay her artistes was a shock from which it was impossible to recover without medical aid. And the beehives continued to bewilder her. She could not banish them from her brain. At lunch she was so deaf and felt so enervated, that she determined to give up her engagement to attend the annual meeting of the Children's Happy Evenings Association and to go instead to see Dr Edgar, who was always in on Thursday afternoons between three and five.

Arriving at Upper Brook Street, she was shown into the waiting-room, and was surprised to find only one other patient in possession of the premises. Usually six or seven people fidgeted in chairs, suffered from the stuffiness of the unventilated room, rumpled the papers, or compared their watches with the clock. In a short time, therefore, she found herself in the consulting room, in the kindly care of Dr Edgar, who was genuinely concerned to see her in such an unusually low condition.

"The fact is, you're tired out," he said. "I have always tried to impress on you that your hearing with your weak ear depended entirely on your general state of health. Now you've let that run down. You've allowed that wretched gout to get the better of you. Perhaps you study too much. Or perhaps you've had a shock. Have you had a shock?"

"Yes," said Ermyntrude, quietly.

"May I ask of what nature?" Dr Edgar enquired.

She hesitated.

"I could scarcely define it," she answered at last. "But though indefinable, it is real."

He nodded his head gravely, and pressed her for no confidence.

"Don't let yourself be worried more than you can help," he said. "And don't read too much. I think your brain wants a rest. Go out into the open air as much as you can. You have beautiful Kensington Gardens almost outside your house. And now the Tube can take you straight up to the heights of Hampstead Heath. Haunt that sweet countryside, and get braced up by the strong air. And another good idea. You are fond of music. That will soothe you. Don't go into hot concert rooms. Have someone to come to your house and play for you, quietly, you know, alone, in solitary grandeur, as though you were the King of Bavaria! I think that it is an admirable prescription, and moreover harmless! I have a growing belief that beautiful music ought to be used deliberately as a healing power. I sometimes prescribe music, when other doctors would order massage, electricity or travel. Indeed, I think we doctors ought to keep the names and addresses of good singers and players who are crowded out from the concert platform, and never get paid in private houses. Far better for them to go to houses as healers and be paid, than to be invited socially as entertainers and not to be paid. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," said Ermytrude faintly, conscious of another shock.

"Well, I must not worry you with my wonderful schemes," he said, seeing that she had suddenly become more tired. "Now do take my advice, Mrs Bending, and go gently with yourself. And give yourself the benefit of music. Do you know, last evening I sat alone in a dimly-lighted drawing-room listening to beautiful playing. I came to that house strangely out of tune with myself, and went away soothed and uplifted. Mrs Rivers is a born musician. She——"

"Mrs Rivers," Ermytrude interrupted, conscious of another shock. "I understood you to say you did not know her."

"Ah, I have not had a chance of telling you that I have lately come across her," Dr Edgar said. "I remember you

asked me once whether I knew a lady of that name. I had not then had the pleasure of making her acquaintance. But it so happened that one of my patients, the friend of Mrs Rivers's companion, was taken to her house, out of her mind and dying. No use to trouble you with the details. Thus I learnt to know Mrs Rivers. She is a large-hearted woman, and extraordinarily unselfish."

Ermyntrude was silent.

"Quite remarkably unselfish," Dr Edgar continued. "She was in the first flush of happiness over her engagement when that little dying woman was brought to her house; yet she brushed everything else aside, and gave herself up gladly to the demands of the moment—the hopeless illness and death of a stranger. I go into many houses, year in, year out. And I have never seen such unselfishness as this."

He paused a moment, half expecting Mrs Bending to make some comment on his allusion to Mrs Rivers's engagement; but all she did, was to bow her head slightly as though in sympathetic acquiescence, and he went on:

"Well, her playing, for instance, has that secret healing in it. If she were a professional, I should put her at the top of my list and send her round to my sick patients who loved music."

He waited again. But Mrs Bending maintained her reticence and closed her eyes.

"She would heal them," he added, making a last attempt to draw her out. "She has a fine heart, and a fine reconciling gift."

"Music is indeed a wonderful power," Ermyntrude said, keeping obstinately to the region of impersonality. "Your scheme is an admirable one. Your large practice should give you ample opportunity for carrying it out successfully."

"Ah," said Dr Edgar, suddenly becoming light-hearted. "I'm going to reduce my practice. Fewer appointments, more leisure, less money, a gayer spirit, and time to breathe! A different attitude towards everyday life. In fact, I've rebelled against myself, Mrs Bending

"I hope you are not intending to turn me away," Ermyntrude said.

He laughed at the very idea, and she laughed softly too, sure as ever of her recognised rights as a privileged personage.

"Now do remember what I've told you to-day," he urged. "Don't study too much. If you must read, choose a few light novels and run through them upside down. That's the proper position for novels. On no account go to any lectures or meetings. When your ear is as bad as this, you strain yourself to hear continuously, and thus increase the trouble. And don't worry. It is amusing though, how we doctors dare to tell people not to worry, isn't it? Ah, we are an audacious band! This item of our advice comes into the same category as ordering penniless patients off to New Zealand or Johannesburg!"

She smiled, but a little uneasily. In spite of his kindness, he puzzled her to-day. What did he mean by 'audacious band,' and 'harmless prescription?' She took leave of him feeling that she had not derived the usual solid benefit from her visit, though he had given her more than his wonted care and attention. She admitted that frankly. But his appreciation of Mrs Rivers, and his evident knowledge of her engagement to Edward, had struck a discordant note in her mind. And he, also, appeared to have joined the ranks of people who were suddenly altering their attitude towards life. Well, it was extremely puzzling and unexpected. Rebellion seemed in the air. Either she was ill and could not find her bearings, or else these people were ill and had lost theirs. But she was thankful for his prescription of brain-repose. She sighed with relief to think that for a few days at least she was exonerated from severe intellectual efforts. Perhaps she did sometimes overtax her mental powers. She regretted that the early years of her life had not been consecrated to scholarship; for then her brain, innured to the habit of study, would have been suitably equipped to cope with subtle and searching subjects. It could cope now, of

course, yet the strain was undeniable. Well, for the moment she would make no effort. She would read Prescott's 'History of Mexico and Peru,' and perhaps Motley's 'Dutch Republic.' Science, philosophy and psychology should be severely set aside until she had recovered tone.

Inspired by this comforting resolution, Ermyntrude glanced at her watch and found that she was not too late for part of the Children's Happy Evenings Annual Meeting at the Duchess of Loudoun's house in Arlington Street. Should she go? She decided not to go. Temporary indifference to the welfare of the children, and an uneasy, almost disapproving distaste for duchesses invaded her soul. She sought instead a tea shop in New Bond Street, and leaning back in a comfortable chair, sipped a cup of chocolate, tried to forget Bess, long robes, beehives, and artistes' fees, and enjoyed the first-fruits of her freedom from the obligations of strenuous study and unflinching discharge of daily duty towards others. That half-hour of escape from self-inflicted routine was as enjoyable to Ermyntrude as poor little Sparrowbird's stolen moments of rapture in the dingy ABC shop.

But even as Sparrowbird used to be suddenly recalled to a sense of duty, and to hurry precipitately from the halls of pleasure, so now Ermyntrude, beginning to think of Bess, Edward, the Bending honour, and the impending mésalliance, felt irresistibly impelled to quit her haven and undertake the disagreeable but conscientious task of once more begging her brother-in-law to consider the inadvisability of his marriage with a divorced woman. She rose to go. As she rose, a new thought leapt into her mind. Dr Edgar had said that this woman was extraordinarily unselfish. He said he had been into many houses, and that he had never seen such unselfishness. How would it be, then, for her to seek out Mrs Rivers and appeal to that unselfishness? If she loved Edward, she would not wish to ruin his social career, at a critical moment, too, when he had all in his hands, and honours were being showered on him from many directions. If she understood that she would probably prove to be a

stumbling-block in his path, she might, perhaps, retire of her own accord. In any case the experiment was worth trying.

It was an audacious step to take, but people of Ermyntrude's disposition, whose leading characteristic is unimpassioned deliberation of mind and action, are impelled sometimes, by the mysterious laws of average, to act in a manner impossible to the most impulsive natures. Even as the gentlest can be the rudest, and the kindest can be the hardest, so Ermyntrude, urged on by the driving force of her new idea, hurried away from the luxurious tea shop and dashed off in a taximeter to Old Queen Street. It was the first time she had driven in one of these carriages. Hitherto she had believed their great speed would disturb her nervous system. Now she found herself wishing that the blue-coated driver would rush along twice as fast. She paid him quickly, hastened up the steps with unusual precipitation, and pressed the bell without delay. Quong opened the door immediately. Yes, Mrs. Livers was at home. Ermyntrude heard her playing. Would she see visitors? Quong reassured her. Mrs. Livers only 'pactising'.

"Please come along," Quong said, smiling with extreme friendliness, for he admired this stately personage. "I tell her Mrs. Bending, yes? Same name Captain Bending. I remember."

Ermyntrude followed him to the drawing-room door, and he was turning the handle when she suddenly prevented him.

"I will not interrupt her when she is playing," she said softly. "I will wait here."

Quong nodded. That was not new to him. Many visitors sank down on the comfortable couch in the corner outside the drawing-room, and listened in quiet delight as Mrs. Rivers played on uninterruptedly. Margaret herself often sat there and waited. Even Paul sometimes came there to listen unobserved and 'silently steal away'. Quong therefore disappeared to his own mysterious quarters, ready as ever to emerge at the precisely right moment when he was wanted.

Ermyntrude leaned against the cushions of the couch, and

closed her eyes, not from intellectual affectation, this time, but from a real and demanding impulse to shut out the everyday world and pass with sightless vision into the enchanted realms of music. She crossed the magic threshold, went through the magic portal—and entered.

Harriet was playing Brahms's Sonata in F Minor.

Brahms loosens the fetters, unlocks the great distances, destroys the fruitless pettinesses, raises a harvest of fine possibilities, sends out a mighty message, invokes the answering and vibrating echoes.

The music ceased.

Quong sprang up from nowhere and stood, expecting a sign from Mrs Bending. But Ermytrude did not open her eyes, did not move, did not speak. (Quong was puzzled. He dropped an umbrella.

Then she looked up and returned to the realities of life. Why was she here? What was her mission? Ah yes, yes. She remembered now. To beg Mrs Rivers to renounce Edward of her own accord. To point out to her—since she had an unselfish heart—that Edward's best interests exacted from him that he should not make a *mésalliance*. Oh, what had she been thinking of? She was filled with shame. Why, it was impossible, outrageous, to ask this, to wish this, from a woman who could play in this wonderful way, with the true spirit of the musician and the true ring of the spiritual making its own unerring appeal to the thrill in the human heart—no—no, such a woman must be a great woman, with a fine perception and an insight into the secret of hidden things—not a single harsh, unfair word could be said to her—should be said to her—no—no.

She rose, her face transfigured by the rush of generous emotions, her stately bearing eased to a gentler inclination. Quong glided forward and pointed encouragingly to the drawing-room door. But she shook her head, put her finger to her mouth, enjoining silence on him, waved her hand in the direction of the hall door, followed him with soft but quick steps, left no message, gave no explanation, and was gone.

CHAPTER XXII

A NEW order of things' began in Melbury Road. Ermytrude studied less, went about more, and made no attempt to edit Bess. She never questioned her as to where she had been, and never thrust her companionship on her rebelling daughter. She gave no more signs of benevolent patience, and there were even days when she was thoroughly disagreeable. She never referred to Mrs Rivers or Miss Tressider, and she renounced all thoughts of the musical party. Chess had long since been abandoned. Talks on conveyancing were follies of the past. She was carrying out to the letter Edward's instructions concerning 'the long rope,' and she extended it to him also, demanding apology for his rough behaviour and abrupt departure, and harbouring no resentment against him for his stubborn silence. At first she had thought of justifying herself to him on the subject of the private detective. She decided that silence was the most dignified and sensible course. Silence sometimes meant separation. But sometimes it stood for a strong and safe bridge.

Owing to the unsettled state of the money market, some complications had arisen in reference to her new investments; and on the third morning after her flight from Old Queen Street, she went to the County and Westminster Bank to consult Mr William Tressider. She found Margaret Tressider waiting to see her brother. Margaret was hugely delighted when she recognised Mrs Ermytrude. Harriet's cause having prevailed, Margaret felt at liberty to amuse herself a little with this wonderful specimen of superiority.

"I am afraid my brother will be a long time," she said. "He has one of the directors with him."

"Indeed," said Ermyntrode stiffly.

"I am quite willing that you should precede me, Mrs Bending," she continued "I've waited half an hour, but I never mind how long I wait before seeing poor William The longer the better, so far as I am concerned He's so dull and pompous, isn't he? Good, respectable, honest and all that sort of thing, but dull

Ermyntrode made no comment She preferred to ignore Miss Tressider's inappropriate remarks

"Surprisingly honest," Margaret continued, "surprisingly honest, in spite of his appearance

"In spite of his appearance Ermyntrode repeated in voluntarily

"Why, of course Margaret answered imply "Physically he is the exact type of bank manager who would be most likely to make off with the money Respectable, steady going, reliable and pious looking And rather stout A dangerous type, that "

"Really, Miss Tressider," Ermyntrode remonstrated, beginning to feel alarmed

"But in William's case," Margaret went on, "the exception proves the rule I assure you he is thoroughly honest and honourable If I had large sums of money to invest, I should certainly entrust them to his discreet and faithful care He would probably try to induce me to leave them to him at my death, but he would not touch a farthing of them during my life time I think you will admit there is a difference Yes, William is a real Pillar of Society—and dull, like most pillars I shouldn't be surprised if they made him a bishop some day "

A ghost of a smile passed over Ermyntrode's face. She was not quite sure what attitude to adopt towards Miss Tressider, but she glanced at her and saw a twinkle in her eye. This encouraged her to believe that Margaret was merely indulging in a little playful criticism, which must not be taken too seriously And she remembered that this woman had been making comments to Bess on life and workers and

duchesses—comments which Ermyntrude in her heart of hearts knew to be true: not comfortable to hear, perhaps, but true. She did not like Miss Tressider's manner, nor her tone. But being just, she was bound to admit that some of her opinions, triumphantly reported by Bess herself, had an honest ring in them; and certainly there was no harm in going to see those beehives in St George-in-the-East. Now how would it be for her to try and put herself in touch with a new set of circumstances? Mentally she had given way in the case of Mrs Rivers, although no one yet knew this secret fact. Should she attempt some overtures of friendliness towards Miss Tressider? Life was full of capitulations. Philosophy enjoined harmony with the inevitable. She bent forward and touched Margaret lightly on the hand

"Well, you at least are not dull, Miss Tressider," she said—"so my little Bess tells me"

Margaret looked up at her in surprise, and at once changed her casual manner to a friendly easiness

"I'm glad to hear it," she said lightly "I'm a little anxious about myself when I have to see my brother two or three times consecutively! Dullness is infectious, isn't it? I was feeling fearfully dull the other day, when your dear little daughter came and flooded me with sunshine, Mrs Bending. That magic of youth—what a magic it is, isn't it?"

This was a new idea to Ermyntrude, but she nodded her head sympathetically, as though she knew all about it.

"She seemed to me like the fresh spring leaves," Margaret went on. "And to Mrs Rivers too. Really, there is nothing on earth fairer and more stimulating than a modern young English girl. I am so thankful she need never be dull nowadays. What a fine bit of work our generation has done in rescuing her from such a horrible possibility."

This also was a new idea to Ermyntrude, but she again inclined her head, and Margaret added.

"We saw seventy of them yesterday all in a batch! young, strong, and beautiful"

"Seventy?" Ermyntrude asked.

Margaret nodded.

"Yes, at a Physical Training College," she explained. "And a wave of gladness and pride swept over us. I dreamt about them all last night. That's why I felt gay-hearted enough to come and see my brother to-day."

Ermyntrude laughed this time.

"You ought to take Bess to that college," she said. "She would be interested. You appear, by the way, to give her interesting experiences. She spoke of having seen beehives in St George-in-the-East. I am much obliged to you for your kindness."

Margaret again looked at her in surprise.

"Thank you, Mrs Bending," she said gently. "It is generous of you to say that."

Ermyntrude closed her eyes.

"I am glad the dear child should seek her pleasures in her own way, Miss Tressider," she said, with a slight return to her stiff manner. "I own there has been a struggle in my mind—for many reasons—a different atmosphere altogether—Mrs Rivers's history—and——"

Margaret broke in.

"I assure you," she cried with great earnestness, "your little Bess could take no harm from Harriet Rivers—from me perhaps yes, for I've knocked about the world and lost the few fine sensibilities I ever had—though I would never injure her intentionally. But with Mrs Rivers, the case is altogether different: her outlook is noble—there are only good thoughts in her heart and gentle words on her lips, and her character has a rare simplicity and openness which make one ashamed of one's own entanglements."

Margaret's words brought back to Ermyntrude the memory of that music of Brahms. Once more the fetters were loosened, the great distances were unlocked, the fruitless pettinesses destroyed. She softened again.

"You admire your friend, Miss Tressider," she said. "You believe in her."

"I have every reason to believe in her," Margaret answered

eagerly. "She rescued me when I was sinking deeper and deeper into shoddiness of thought and action. Whatever comes between us, I'm on her side for ever and ever."

"What could come between you?" Ermyntrude asked.

"Time and circumstance," Margaret replied gravely. "They rob us of our best possessions."

"Not of our ideals," Ermyntrude said, lapsing into temporary superiority.

"No, of course not," Margaret answered. "*They* could never be touched by mere incidental realities. Ah, half past eleven. I shall have to be going. Perhaps you will give this envelope to my brother for me, Mrs Bending -my changeling brother, as Miss Bess calls him. I am obliged to attend a Suffrage Committee Meeting: the militant party, you know. Dear, dear, I'm rather glad I'm not in prison on this fine May morning. Fancy having to miss seeing the window-boxes and the baskets of spring flowers on the London pavements. How I do enjoy the colour and scent of the wallflowers and cowslips just now!"

Ermyntrude rose and took the envelope held out to her.

"I will deliver it without fail to the banker who will some time be made a bishop," she said smiling indulgently.

Margaret laughed, and was on the point of leaving, when she stopped suddenly, hesitated a moment and said:

"Mrs Bending, you came to our house the other day, but changed your mind and went away without seeing us."

"Yes," answered Ermyntrude reservedly. "The—the music overpowered me. Mrs Rivers has the musician's secret. I—I went away."

"Ah," thought Margaret as she passed out of the Bank. "There's something mysterious about that. Why did she come, and why did she go? I must ferret that out some other day. Something surprising about Mrs Ermyntrude too. Didn't realise she could be so human and generous. It only shows that one must never despair even of the very best people. A sense of fun also. She has rather astonished me."

Margaret had astonished Ermyntrude. What was it she had been saying? Ah, yes. Bess had flooded her with sunshine. She thought of her as fresh spring leaves. That was a beautiful idea. And what else? Ah, yes. The magic of youth. A wave of gladness and pride. The horrible possibility of dullness. Ideals not touched by mere incidental realities. The militant party of Suffragists. Prison. The joy of not having to miss seeing the baskets of spring flowers on the London pavement. And the window boxes. Well now, she personally had never thought of them as forming any important part of everyday life. Yet when she came to consider the subject seriously, she had to own that Miss Tressider was right. They are a real beauty and decoration to the London streets. And her remarks about her brother were certainly funny. A banker being made into a bishop! She smiled. Perhaps Mr Tressider was a trifle pompous. And Mrs River? Ah, she had spoken up gallantly for her friend who had rescued her from oddities, of thought and action. What had she said? She was on her side for ever and ever. Well, it was soothing to meet a grateful—

At that moment Margaret's chattering brother came to apologise to Mrs Bending for having kept her waiting. He explained that the delay was unavoidable owing to a prolonged interview with one of his directors.

"The time has not dragged at all, sure you, Ermyntrude said pleasantly. I have been talking with your sister, Mr Tressider.

"Indeed, said William looking piously pained, for Margaret's possible conduct was always a source of uneasiness to him. "I trust you found her—well—how shall I put it—she is a little perverse in manner sometimes.

"I found her surprising," Ermyntrude remarked.

"Yes, she is that, unfortunately," William replied, thinking of Aunt Caroline's handsome and rejected offer. "She is that."

"And instructive," Ermyntrude added. "I—I fear I have not been doing her justice."

"Really?" William asked, lifting his eyebrows, but encouraged to learn that Margaret had evidently not been disgracing him. "Please come this way, Mrs Bending."

They disappeared into the inner sanctum and were soon engrossed in Ermytrude's favourite subject of investments.

Meantime Brother William's perverse sister sped along to her committee meeting, and reached home in time for lunch.

She found Bess there. Bess had brought her Guarnerius, and Harriet and she had been playing some duets for piano and violin. Bess was proud beyond words to play with such a fine musician as Uncle Ted's shipmate, and Harriet had not allowed her to be nervous. She moderated her own powers to suit the young girl's tone and style, pulled her along sometimes, let her go at other times, followed her merrily when she scampered away, and came in with her at the end in grand style. Then she kissed her, clapped her hands and cried "Bravo! A lot of 'go' in your playing, Bess dear. Capital! Let's have some more."

They were just starting to play the César Franck Sonata, when Paul suddenly appeared. He looked cross, but his face cleared when he recognised Bess.

"Ah, that's the Guarnerius," he cried excitedly; and he snatched it from her hands, rushed to the window, turned the fiddle about in all directions, and finally without addressing a single remark to anyone, fled from the room armed with the treasure. They could only look at each other and laugh at the short but amazing episode.

"He has bagged the Guarnerius," Margaret said. "I told you it wasn't safe to bring it to the house. I never saw him so much taken up with a restoration. You will have to come and steal it yourself, Bess, in the dead of night, by moonlight."

"Nonsense," said Harriet. "Paul will bring it down himself in a short time."

"I'm sure I'm only too glad he should enjoy himself with it," Bess said enthusiastically. "I think he is quite wonderful, Mrs Rivers. The real thing, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is indeed the real thing," Harriet answered proudly, quite forgetting her promise to keep a look-out from the crow's nest. "He's a great genius—that's what he is."

"Yes," said Bess, her face aglow with enthusiasm. "Yes. A great genius."

"And a great nuisance," remarked Margaret, nudging Harriet secretly.

"Oh, Miss Tressider, how can you say that?" Bess asked reproachfully.

"But I do say it, my dear," Margaret replied laughing. "He has made sticking plaster of my beautiful pomegranate embroidery. I don't say that that isn't genius, mind you. No doubt it is! Ah, the lunch gong! I'm so hungry. The County and Westminster Bank always gives me an appetite. From old association, I suppose. I didn't see Brother William, the changeling. He was shut up with one of his directors. But I saw some one else there. Your mother, Bess."

"I do hope she wasn't—wasn't—distant?" Bess asked anxiously.

"She began by being distant, and I began by being casual," answered Margaret smiling. "And we ended by laughing together over Brother William. My genius brought that about. It's a curious thing that no one seems to think anything of my genius. I declare I'm tired of playing second fiddle to that wretched Paul."

"Don't be ridiculous," Harriet scolded. "You know perfectly well that I think you are wonderful."

"And I think you are wonderful," Bess cried. "For mother isn't—isn't easy to get on with."

"Ah, she's going to be easier," Margaret said mysteriously. "The beehives have helped."

Bess laughed.

"Isn't that just like mother!" she said. "The beehives appealed to her intellect."

"No, it wasn't that," Harriet said gently. "The beehives made her realise that her little Bess would take no harm from me and my friends."

"Oh, Mrs Rivers, dear, dear Mrs Rivers," the girl exclaimed with all the loving generosity of which her young heart was capable—"I can't bear to hear you say that. Mother does not really think that I could come to any harm here—it's only that she does not understand—she has been so sheltered—so shut in—but she'll learn—I'm sure she'll learn—you mustn't be sad—you mustn't have those tears in your eyes—it isn't fair on you—indeed it isn't."

They were still at lunch, but Bess in her eagerness had left her place and was standing beside Harriet, pleading with her, as it were, to be merciful to herself.

Margaret glanced from the one to the other ; and her own eyes grew dim at the pathetic sight of the young girl trying to do battle with the older woman's silent regrets. Loving words of appreciation of Bess and encouragement of Harriet rose to her lips. She checked them. Experience had taught her that Harriet could generally be helped by being rescued at once from her sad reflections. So she rose somewhat brusquely, and with successful carelessness, upset her glass of water, a trick of hers which invariably annoyed Harriet.

"Margaret, you are careless," she said, coming straightway out of her misery.

"Yes, I know I am," Margaret replied humbly. "But don't scold me. I believe I shall have to consult Dr Edgar. I'm sure I'm losing the sight of my left ear!"

They laughed, helped to mop up the water, and passed into the hall. They were standing by the couch looking at one of Harriet's favourite pictures, the snow-peaks of the Bernese Oberland, when Paul came rushing downstairs, with one of his own fiddles under his arm. There was no charming mysterious smile on his face. He seemed in fierce earnest over some project he had in his mind.

"Look here," he cried, making direct for Bess, "I've fitted this up—you must play on it now—at once—I haven't heard its tone yet—it ought to be full and rich—one of my best fiddles—grand Strad model slightly altered—fourth

string ought to be superb—come now at once—that Largo of Handel's, Harriet—you know——”

The greatest player could not have been at his best in the circumstances; for Paul's excitement was not the enthusiastic eagerness of a sane person. it was the driving brutality of a madman. Bess was not a great player. She was only a fairly musical young girl who had been well taught.

But being Uncle Ted's own niece, she was plucky. She made no sign of nervousness, tuned the fiddle, fitted it to her chin, raised her bow and began. She had scarcely played twenty bars, when Paul, who had stationed himself at the further end of the drawing-room, dashed up to her and snatched the fiddle from her

“You can't play,” he cried angrily—“you don't know how to make it sound—I don't want to hear you—it ought to be full and rich—not thin and squeaky—it is full and rich—it's my best fiddle—you can't play”

He turned his back on her and fled with the fiddle, leaving poor little Bess standing petrified, and Harriet and Margaret shocked at the old sign post's unkindness. But Bess accepted her mortification and defeat with sportsman-like spirit.

“He's awfully angry, isn't he?” she said gallantly. “And I don't wonder. Of course I couldn't have done his splendid fiddle justice.”

“You're a brick to take it that way, Bess,” Harriet cried impulsively.

“Yes, a regular Bending brick,” agreed Margaret. “That's what you are”

“Well, he's the ‘real thing,’ all the same, whether he is angry with me or not,” Bess put in, heedless of their praise.

“The real thing, but uncertain,” Harriet said smiling gratefully at her.

“The real thing, but weird,” Margaret remarked. “And I bet you a hundred pounds of your Uncle Ted's money for the ‘Voyage of the *Canute*’ that you'll never get your Guarnerius back, unless you come and steal it in the dead of night, by

moonlight. When will you come, Bess? To-night—to-morrow?"

Bess shook her head.

"No, no," she said eagerly. "There's plenty of time. Let him have it. I'm proud to think it's in his workshop."

So the Guarnerius remained behind in Old Queen Street; but in spite of her rebuff, Bess took with her an unimpaired enthusiasm for the genius of the strange man who had fascinated her from the beginning. He himself, without knowing it, had rendered her a beautiful service, and had helped her to see him in his true relationship to the outer world. And because she had a large spirit, the impersonal meaning of him retained its full significance. For he had opened doors for her into a world of wonder, the world of 'the real thing,' and no one could close them—not even Paul himself.

Very beautiful seemed the flowers and trees as she walked home through the Park and Kensington Gardens. The tulips were still holding their own; but they knew in their heart of hearts that they would soon have to yield to the calceolarias, the fuchsias and geraniums, and they had already been obliged to share their honours with the irises, the hawthorns and laburnums, the lilacs and horse chestnuts. Bess nodded to them all, to the flowers in the beds, and the blue bells under the trees, to the lovely larches and the resolute copper beeches. They helped to heal her; for she would not have been human if she had not been a little wounded by her afternoon's experience. But she recovered herself as she approached Melbury Road, and she entered her mother's house with head erect and flag flying full mast. Nevertheless she was in a chastened mood that evening, and made up her mind to be less casual with dear, good old Hughie, and to condole sweetly with him about his dull days in Clement's Inn. This was the first time since the Emancipation, that she had felt any great longing to see him, or any affectionate inclination to sympathise with his hard fate. Another rebuff awaited her. Hughie did not come. He telegraphed that he had gone to a cricket dinner.

CHAPTER XXIII

PAUL'S outburst of temp^{er} with Bess was the beginning of one of his sulky spells, during which it was his habit to refuse food. When Margaret came home to lunch on the second day of his fast, she found Harriet in the depths of despair.

"He won't even have a chili," Harriet said in her most plaintive tone. "Think of that, Margaret."

"I know what's the matter with him," Margaret said. "He's fretting in his queer way at the thought of losing you. Do you know I sometimes feel as if I couldn't take even a chili."

Harriet smiled and held out her hand to her friend.

"It seems awful of me to desert you," she said wistfully. "And yet I'm so happy. The happiest woman in the world and the proudest. But happiness spells selfishness."

"Most people's happiness, but not yours," Margaret returned. "As for deserting, that's not the word. All the people who have ever married have had to 'desert' some one. 'Parting from' is the right expression. 'Desertion' implies wilful abandonment. 'Parting from,' a yielding to the inevitable in some form or other. Don't you think I'm right? And am I not clever?"

"I wish you could be clever enough to suggest how I could win Mrs Bending," Harriet replied. "She is the only cloud over my happiness. I can't bear to think that my engagement to Edward should alienate him from anyone of his own people. He is reticent on the subject, but I'm sure he is sorry for the estrangement. He has a real regard for Mrs Ermytrude, though he pretends that he has thrown all his family traditions into the waste-paper basket. And

you know he never sees her now. He refused to call before he went off to Dublin the other day. He said she had irritated him beyond all endurance. It had to do with my history, of course. Sometimes I wonder whether it would not be much better for Edward if I did give him up. I may prove to be a hindrance to him."

"And you may prove to be a help, my dear," Margaret answered. "Don't worry your head and heart about that. The Captain wasn't born yesterday. He knows his own mind."

"Yes, but does he know his own best interests?" asked Harriet thoughtfully.

"I'm sure I hope he doesn't," Margaret laughed. "He would be like Brother William then. Heaven forbid. No, Harriet, leave that alone. And don't concern yourself about Mrs. Ermyntrude. I have a sneaking belief that she's not altogether hopelessly good. I may be mistaken. In that case I shall never give any good people the benefit of the doubt again."

"If Mrs. Ermyntrude were to come and tell me as woman to woman that I should be a stumbling block in Edward's career, I should give him up," Harriet said.

"I'm certain you would," Margaret answered lightly. "Well, let's hope she won't come."

But as she spoke, the idea flashed instantly across her mind that Mrs. Bending had come on that very mission and gone away. She recalled her words: "*Mrs. Rivers has the musician's secret. The music overpowered me. I—I went away.*"

"Let's hope she won't come," she repeated. "And I suppose you'd scarcely go to her, would you?"

"No," said Harriet smiling. "My philosophy wouldn't carry me as far as that, Margaret."

"Well, that's good news," Margaret said. "And now let us go up and see what we can do for Paul, poor old chap. We must get him to eat something. I know. Buttered eggs with a dash of cheese and a couple of tomatoes, and cook them ourselves in his workshop. He has a fire there."

although it is so hot to-day. If he doesn't cheer up then, send me to take care of my Aunt Caroline for the rest of her immortal life."

Harriet laughed and pressed the bell.

"I don't understand how you think of all these ways of dealing with Paul," she said. "I'm not half so successful as you."

"Simply because you behave too sanely," Margaret answered. "Cultivate a little more insanity, and you'd soon find that Paul would respond in the opposite direction. Ah, here's Quong."

"Quong, some eggs, cheese, butter, two or three tomatoes, bread and a saucepan at once," Harriet ordered gravely.

Quong showed no signs of astonishment, vanished, re-appeared with a laden tray, and then retired in his usual magic fashion. The two women went upstairs, knocked at Paul's door, and after some period of waiting, were told gruffly to come in. Yes, Paul was in one of his surliest moods. He sat huddled up on the sofa looking the picture of desolation and sulkiness. The disorder around his bench was the disorder of neglect, and not of work. He had not touched his tools for two days, nor bestowed a thought on his varnish. He had not once handled Bess's Guarnerius. He looked up as the women came in, but gave no sign of greeting. Margaret was not daunted. She was accustomed to dealing with him in his darkest moments, and she had watched this dumb despair encompassing him more and more as the days went on and the time was approaching for Harriet's marriage. It was true that no definite date had been fixed, but it was understood in the Westminster household that the engagement would only be a short one.

Margaret knew that they must feed him first, and try to reach his sadness afterwards. As she glanced at him, her own sadness and desolation knocked at her own heart. Harriet was very dear to them both, and they were going to lose her. Well, well, but they must not spoil her happiness.

Paul would understand that. What was his phrase? *All right for Harriet—quite sure all right for Harriet?*

These thoughts struggled for utterance, but she suppressed them bravely and confined her attention only to practical matters.

"Paul, do, you mind if I make a dish of buttered eggs with cheese and tomatoes?" she asked cheerfully. "I've come in late for lunch, and am as hungry as a trooper. And the kitchen fire is out. And the cook is asleep. And Harriet's frightened to wake her up. Harriet's an awful duffer to be so frightened of the servants, isn't she?"

"She isn't frightened of the servants," he said sulkily. "That's nonsense."

"Well, the kitchen fire's out," Margaret said winking at Harriet.

"It can be lit again," Paul remarked crossly. "You're so absurd sometimes. You don't use your brains, Margaret."

"Of course it can be lit again," Margaret said meekly. "I never thought of that. Yes, I am absurd sometimes. But not so ridiculous as Harriet. She wants to do things that I should never dream of doing."

"Harriet isn't at all ridiculous," Paul said, sullenly.

"It's a good piece of luck for her that some one thinks she is sensible," Margaret answered smiling. "Here, Harriet, put the saucepan back on the tray. I'll wake the cook up and have the buttered eggs cooked in their natural atmosphere. Dear me. How hungry I am! I do hope Maria won't take long over the job. Well, I'm off."

She was making for the door armed with the tray, when Paul rose from the sofa and barred the way.

"You can cook them here, if you like," he said, a little less sulkily. "Perhaps I'll have some, too. Perhaps Harriet will too. Will you, Harriet? Are you hungry?"

"Ravenously hungry," Harriet answered with fervour. "Come, Paul, let's help Margaret. She pretends to be able to cook. But we know what that means, don't we? Do you remember her last attempt at toffy? I think you used it for glueing an old German fiddle together, didn't you?"

Paul smiled. Then he laughed softly.

"Yes, I remember," he said joining them at the fireside. "It was good glue. Much better than Salisbury glue."

They cooked his favourite dish, and had the satisfaction of seeing him make a good square meal. They ate with him too, at the beginning, but he soon forgot to notice whether their hunger were as great as his; and gradually under the influence of the food and the camaraderie of the saucepan, his black mood began to pass away. His face cleared, his eyes brightened, his manner became more brisk. Finally he dashed off to his bench and sat down happily to his neglected work. He whistled softly as he used his favourite little aluminium plane for smoothing down the inside of a back, and his gauging callipers for determining thicknesses; and Harriet and Margaret saw that he had come back safely to his own real life, and had, for the time being, escaped from the darkness of the night and the desolation of the desert. Tears of thankfulness stood in their eyes. They glanced at him and nodded reassuringly at each other.

Suddenly a cheery voice broke upon their happy silence.

"Hulloa, you there on the upper deck," it sang out. "Can I come up?"

"That's my darling back from Dublin!" cried Harriet joyously, and she dashed out of the room forgetting everyone and everything in her passionate eagerness to see her lover. Margaret turned her face anxiously in the direction of Paul to observe the effect which this sudden and unexpected outburst of rapturous delight might have on his fitful mind. To her surprise he went on smiling and whistling as before, and finally looked round at her and said:

"All right for Harriet—all right for Harriet, isn't it?"

"Yes, Paul," Margaret answered nodding. "Quite all right for Harriet. No doubt about that."

"Ah," said Paul, "that's a good thing. Do you know, I never had a better little plane than this little fellow. Couldn't get on without it. Lots of work to do on this back. I've

rather neglected it. Yes, all right for Harriet. Ah, the varnish, of course. I think I'll now give the fifth coat of varnish to that fiddle. Quite time for it to have its fifth coat. Perhaps he'd like to see. Do you think he would? I wouldn't let everyone see. And perhaps not him either."

He had not noticed that Bending and Harriet were back in the workshop, and that Bending was carrying a big slab of wood. Harriet looked the picture of happiness and pride. She pointed to the wood, to Paul and to her shipmate, going through a series of joyful gesticulations which called forth a laugh from Margaret, the only observer.

"Hulloa, Paul," Bending said, as the old sign-post glanced up. "Brought something for you from Ireland. Good piece of maple, if I know anything about wood. What d'you think of it, old chap? I'm dying to hear. If it isn't well seasoned timber, send me back to the North Pole in an airship."

Paul took the slab, examined it under a lens and put it on the floor.

"I don't think anything of that piece of wood," he remarked severely. "It's quite worthless. It isn't well seasoned. And the worms have touched it. And the grain runs in curves. I don't want it. Look here, I'm going to give the fifth coat of varnish to that fiddle. You can see me do it. Shall I let him see, Harriet? No, I don't think I will."

"Yes, yes, Paul," Harriet said coaxingly; and they all gathered round him and gave themselves up whole-heartedly to his concerns. Oil varnish might have been the only thing worth living for, so keen was their interest, so concentrated their attention. They were rewarded by the triumphant smile on Paul's face.

"I believe it's all right," he cried excitedly. "It's beautifully tender and soft. It will yield to all the movements of the wood. Nothing rigid about it."

He glanced at them with sightless eyes, turned away from them, went on with the varnishing, and became unconscious of their presence.

They stole out of the workshop, satisfied that Paul was happy in his own way, and did not need them. In the hall they found Dr Edgar who said he had come to take Margaret for a motor drive

"Do come," he urged. "It's such a lovely afternoon, and I want to go to Chelsea and see Carlyle's house. After wards we'll have a spin round the Park and a run up to Hampstead. Will you come? Do. It is part of my education."

"Of course she'll come," Harriet answered decidedly. "I'll dress you up, Margaret. And Edward will look after you, Dr Edgar. Oh, he's had such a splendid time in Dublin. I'm so excited and proud. I don't know what I shall do at the Royal Institution Lecture. You'll be there too, won't you? I think you'll have to give me some soporific, lest my high spirits should run away with me even amidst that severe audience. And the 'Voyage of the *Canute*' is nearly finished. Some of the proofs have come already. Margaret says I don't know a comma from a comet, but I'm going to do some corrections, too. And Paul is so happy over the varnish this afternoon. Isn't that splendid? All through Margaret. She has such a knack with him. Edward, my darling, find the Doctor a cigar. In the right hand locker of the bureau, you know."

She followed Margaret upstairs and said in her impulsive way

"That man loves you. Anyone can see that. Do encourage him a little, Margaret. I should dearly like to know that you too had a good and fine husband. I believe he's going to propose to you to day. I feel it in the air."

"Nonsense," Margaret answered laughing. "A man wouldn't take a woman to poor old Carlyle's house to propose to her. Not a very encouraging setting for that purpose."

"Well, anyway, he loves you," Harriet said undaunted. "You must surely know it."

"You reprobate, you've got me on your conscience,"

Margaret answered. "That's what's the matter with you. You want to see me 'settled in life,' as they call it, just to get me off your conscience. I'll have nothing to do with you."

"He loves you," Harriet persisted valiantly.

Margaret shook her head

"He thinks I'm a good comrade," she said. "And so I am. But lots of men have thought that. And if I'd married them all, I should have found it very expensive to support them all!"

"You're incorrigible," her friend said, laughing in spite of herself.

"My dear, you're in love, very much in love," Margaret remarked, as she put the finishing touches to her motor veil. "And therefore you imagine everyone else is in love. Even as mad people believe everyone else is mad."

"Except themselves," Harriet added triumphantly. "Whereas I know I'm in love, Margaret—desperately in love."

"And yet you'd give Bending up at a moment's notice," Margaret said recklessly.

"Give him up?" she cried. "Oh, never, never! What can you mean?"

"Ah, she's forgotten about renouncing him for his own good," thought Margaret. "And I was a fool to remind her. But there's no danger for to day. The rapture of reunion will keep all things right for to day. I wonder whether Dr Edgar could work on Mrs Ermytrude's feelings. I believe she has feelings arranged tidily on the top shelf of a locked bookcase. Shall I ask him to help us?"

She did not ask him anything as they sped along to Carlyle's house in Cheyne Row. She was singularly silent, for her talkative nature. Harriet's words and earnest manner had set her thinking. Dr Edgar did the talking, and was exceedingly happy and unreserved. He spoke of the delight of having more leisure, and of the resolution he had made to earn less money, put less pressure on himself, and manage

with a smaller quantity of 'humbug.' He said quite frankly that he had been losing most of the ideals with which he started out on his career, and that he would probably have parted from the last lingering few, but for her intervention.

"My intervention?" she said. She was dumbfounded.

Yes, he told her. Did she not remember how she had been polite enough to classify him amongst the humbugs who ought to be thankful to be rescued from the necessity of being humbugs and shams? He was stupid enough to take offence. Surely she remembered that? Her remark had haunted him. He set to work forthwith to examine himself—and what did he find? Well, there was no need to say what he found—except a horrid contemptible greed for money, which he was fighting more or less successfully; with ups and downs, with zeal, with reluctance. Yes, her words had brought him to his senses, and he was trying to free himself from the chains forged by smug prosperity and unchecked worldliness.

"Surely not my words," she protested. "Not my careless, casual words jerked out at random."

"Those are the arrows which hit the mark," he answered. "I might have listened in vain to a sermon in the City Temple."

She was touched beyond the power of speech. This man with a fine brain, a large outlook and a wide experience, in every way infinitely nobler and greater than herself, had seen suddenly that he was on the wrong track, and chose to believe that it was she who had caused him to throw the search-light on his actions, his ambitions, his habits and his plans. His frank delight in his first attempt at 'regeneration' struck her as an added sign of his true nobility and simplicity of character. Even as a schoolboy is thankful to get out of a scrape and start afresh, so he seemed jubilant in freeing himself from the fatal mesh in which life easily holds us all, unless we have the courage and pluck to cut the strands. He expounded his plans with extraordinary fresh-heartedness and enthusiasm. He said he was quite decided on one

point. If he could not make something satisfactorily simple out of his professional life in London, then he would throw it up and try his luck elsewhere on entirely new lines—new at least to him. But for the moment, he thought it was not a bad scheme to battle with his own worldliness and success in the very arena where the complications of life generated difficulties not met with in quieter spheres of action. She listened to him in astonishment. She was amazed at him for owning to his worldliness, in this bare and undisguised fashion, and owning it moreover to her. Why to her? Ah, he loved her. And because he loved her, he had tricked himself into believing that the impetus of his 'fresh start' came from her and her only, whereas it was in reality due to some silent and subtle change in himself, a change which had probably been working itself to a crisis for months, for years. The crisis was there, and he chose to impute it to her influence. *Her influence.* She knew this to be a delusion; but for all that, a great gratitude took possession of her, and a true humility. With a mournful smile she said to herself that no person in his senses would consider her nature capable of inspiring anyone to return to old ideals or to seek out new ideals. Dr Edgar was not in his right senses. She must not take advantage of him. She must protect him from himself. And with this thought in her mind, she suddenly laughed.

"I'm glad to hear you laugh," he remarked. "You've been singularly solemn all the way."

"You've been telling me solemn things," she answered. "How could you expect me to laugh?"

"Boring you, I fear," he said with a touch of anxiety in his voice.

"No, no," she said emphatically. "Nothing of the kind."

And she added mischievously:

"You know I've felt the greatest interest in your career since you threw Aunt Caroline overboard!"

"Why did you laugh suddenly?" he asked, smiling at her, "I'm curious to know,"

"Because here we are in ^{the} ^{old} Cheyne Row," she replied, "and it struck me for the second time that we've come on an interesting but lugubrious expedition—to visit the scenes of domestic unhappiness, temperamental strife and unreasonable remorse. It struck me as being a remarkable plan for a joyous afternoon. I therefore laughed."

"I never looked at my plan from that point of view," he said as they slowed down to No. 24. "You told me I did not know my London well enough, and I'm using some of my free hours to visit some of the hallowed places. This is one. You ought to be pleased with your obedient pupil. You oughtn't to make fun of him. All the same, it is rather funny, now you mention it! But I suppose you don't mind humouring me now that we are here?"

"No, I shall enjoy being thoroughly miserable," she answered as she stepped out of the car. "I often come here when I am wanting to indulge in a fit of the blackest depression."

But when the door was opened and they stepped over the threshold, all thoughts passed from their minds except the overwhelming remembrance that this house had sheltered the great historian and his brilliant wife. The spirit of place waved for them its magic wand. Time sped back for them. There was no need for them to examine the philosopher's books, and peer at his letters, pipes and portraits. A larger vision arrested them. The dead rose up and claimed the precincts of their own home. The friends who had sought the house in the days gone by, stole in now and took possession of their accustomed corners. Noble thoughts and great intentions battled with everyday smallnesses. Mental strain, temperamental suffering and physical illness told their tale afresh. Death stalked into the house. Regret and remorse spoke, in hopeless heart-breaking language. The long years were lived over again. Then Death came once more.

"And so he rested at last," Dr. Edgar said gently, turning for the first time to Margaret.

"Yes," she said "One gives a sigh of relief"

"Yes," he answered dreamily "All pilgrims to this shrine must needs do that"

"And if he had died first, she would have guarded his fame," Margaret said "She would have guarded it as a tigress She would have thrown a sheltering mantle over everything that was not greatness"

"Yes," he said "Women protect their men and the memory of their men, with amazing faithfulness"

They wandered silently through the rooms They did not hurry No one was there but themselves, and the custodian seeing that they were to be trusted, left them alone in the double walled study where 'Frederick the Great' was written Then they found their way downstairs to the kitchen where Tennyson and Carlyle smoked by the fireside And they strolled in the little green garden and saw, with their mind's eye, the bent figure of the old man in his dressing gown, reading or smoking in the company of his good cat Tib And with their mind's eye, too, they saw the small, frail form of Jane Carlyle mounting the oaken staircase and resting her weariness in the little recess half way upstairs And once again they sought the drawing room and stood before the frame containing the historian's letter refusing the offer of the Grand Cross of the Bath, and a pension Dr Edgar read out the words "*the Premier's splendid and generous proposals must not take effect*" "*titles of honour would be an encumbrance, not a furtherance*" "*money had become in this latter time amply abundant, even superabundant*"

He replaced the frame, stood still a moment and then broke out excitedly

"Well, not much worldliness there! What a lesson for us pigmies of to day, who are wrestling and struggling and posing for honours and distinctions, and grabbing for money in all directions and on all pretences! Everyone ought to come here. Everyone Why haven't I been here before? And this is the lesson to take away from here—this lesson on this bit of paper—this roll call to the best in one—that

was the kernel of the man's work—a rousing roll-call over the England, the Europe of his generation—no, not his generation only, but all generations. And this other part—this failure—well, we know it to have been a miserable failure, because there was no one to cover it up with the mantle of mercifulness. You see some weak knock-kneed idiot of a man protected from himself, protected from others, covered, armed, invulnerable, and smiling the sickly smile of safety. But this great man stood stripped before the whole world, his faults laid bare, his failings proclaimed with loud voice. And fate took from him the one being who had suffered most at his hands, and who would have safe-guarded his fame. Yet there's reason in it—isn't there? For his greatness will stand the test of Time. And it's only fair that the weakling should have his feeble hour, his feeble day, since Time is not for him. Come, let us go now—with this as the last thought in our hearts and this lesson of unworldliness vibrating through us.”

She followed him silently down the stairs and out of the house. She was profoundly impressed by his words and his emotions. She knew that an unexpected message had reached him there, and that the outing of the afternoon, undertaken merely for mental enjoyment, had ministered to his spiritual regeneration.

He scarcely spoke as they made their way homewards to Westminster; but as they were nearing Old Queen Street, he said suddenly:

“And this also I owe to you. Yes, I owe it to you.”

This time an even greater gratitude and humility overcame her. She knew more of him now; she appreciated him more; she had heard the fine chords in his nature vibrating to the sound of far-off music; she had seen for herself how his clever brain had recognised and his deft hand had gathered a treasure held out to him. Who else out there, once countless pilgrims to that sombre house found what he found? She of course was only an ordinary person. hitherto her visits to Cheyne Row had been the

immense interest to her, but also of devastating depression. This man came away fortified, stimulated. He had grasped the whole meaning, and she only the partial failure. And here he was telling her again that he owed the afternoon's experience to her.

"And all this I owe to you," he repeated as she made no answer. "Do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you," she answered. "But I don't follow you."

"Yes, you do," he replied masterfully. "You know perfectly well what I mean. But you're perverse."

"You might just as well say that you owe it all to Aunt Caroline," she said lightly. "Or to her old doctor who died and yielded you his august appointment."

"You're perverse," he said laughing. "Never mind. What does that matter? And here we are at Hyde Park Corner. Shall we go back to Old Queen Street, or dash up to Hampstead? Your white hawthorns ought to be in full flower now."

She pointed in the direction of Hampstead, and it was not long before they found themselves on the heights, having on their way paid due homage to the loveliness of Regent's Park with all its varied and luxuriantly grown trees. The late spring had allowed itself the strange luxury of a heavy snowfall, having previously sent round a message that all would be well, and that no one need be anxious. All was well; and certainly Nature in and around London had not for years put forth so many charms at the same time. Everything seemed to have come into its own. The chestnuts, though late, were in their full glory. The red hawthorns had taken on an astoundingly vivid hue, and were obviously proud of their achievement. The beeches, limes, hornbeams and elms had chosen the lightest of bright green tones for their end-of-May garments. The lilacs and laburnums had dressed themselves with quite unusual luxuriance; and there was no doubt that they had made a secret compact with the war-like copper beeches to 'set them off' by a well-defined

contrast for these delightful trees wore regimentals of piercing dark red, darker, bolder and brighter than for many seasons past.

On Hampstead Heath Margaret found her white hawthorns in the perfection of their snow-like beauty. A few steps away from them, near the Leg of Mutton Pond, the gorse had begun to flower, and down by the water's side, the yellow irises amongst the stately reeds were encouraging their gorse comrades to put on their golden insignia. A gay little variegated maple, which was in good spirits at seeing its reflection in the lake, added words of cheer. It cried:

"If you are a little early, golden gorse, no matter. Some of us are late, some of us betimes, and lots of us are lingering on, when we ought to have disappeared long ago. The seasons are all jumbled up this year. I heard from a wren and a nuthatch that many queer things are happening in all the parks. So what does it matter if you make an early appearance? Everyone wants to see you, and the bees are waiting for you impatiently."

The delicate birches, their small leaves glittering in the sunshine, nodded approval. The oaks, preparing for oak apple day, gave benevolent assent. The birds carolled 'yes, yes!' No wonder then, that the gorse bestirred itself, and seemed to be unfolding its treasures whilst Margaret and Dr Edgar paused and looked at it. They paused, too, near the spot where they had found Sparrowbird. The heath-land where she had wandered over the dead bracken, was now covered with a fresh growth springing up lustily out of the brown trodden-down leaves. The limes on the Judge's Walk, which had given her but a sad send-off as she passed under their bare branches on that desolate night, were in full foliage: charged with sweetest fragrance. The great cart horses, in which she had ever taken a friendly interest, were dashing helter skelter into the Stone Pond. Many a time Margaret and she had watched them, sitting on a bench hard by the Flagstaff and dividing their attention between the glories of the distant view and the excitements of the Pond. Margaret

recalled one of the little woman's remarks and told it to the Doctor

"Oh, my dear," she had said, "how sad for the motor cars not to be able to go through the Pond!"

Sweet scenes, generous expanses, gentle groves, quiet bypaths, leafy aisles—a phalanx of forces to keep and guard these fair heights, in spite of a new order of things

It was nearly half-past seven when they arrived back in Old Queen Street

"Thank you for a delightful outing," she said, as he helped her out of the motor

"Thank you," he answered smiling. "You first put these jaunts into my money-grubbing mind, didn't you? And I see I have to make up for lost time and ungrasped pleasures. But fortunately it's not too late—I'll be round in a day or so, and perhaps we'll go to Kew—yes?"

She stood on the doorstep watching until the motor was out of sight. Quong opened the door to her, told her that Captain Bending had gone, and that Mrs Rivers particularly wanted to see her at once.

"Vely important," Quong said, "vely important."

"Nothing wrong, I hope, Quong?" Margaret asked.

"Oh no," the Chinaman answered. "Mrs Livers heap happy. Heap pleased with everybody. Singing about the house same as little young child. I bloke best tea-cup. Mrs Livers heap pleased."

Margaret found Quong's report quite true. Harriet was 'heap happy.'

"Oh, my dear," she cried, "I've had such a splendid afternoon. Edward is such a darling—I'm more in love with him than ever. We've made love, and I've told him about Paul being unkind to dear little Bess—that pleased him mightily—and we've read the 'Voyage of the *Camute*' aloud—yes, and I've corrected some of the proofs—you needn't laugh—they'll all be done over again! And I've given away all the letters for the Surgical Aid Society—I know you'll be cross, but never mind—all to the wrong people—twenty t-

someone who wanted a pair of spectacles only, and two to a railway guard needing a new set of teeth—I always do get confused when you're not here—and I've sent £50 to the Suffrage Societies—I know you'll be delighted to hear that—and Edward, dear old darling, sent £50 too—he said: '*Damn it, the women must have their votes! Here goes!*' But he's dreadfully obstinate about Mrs Ermyntrude. He refuses to go and see her. He says he has 'struck.' He didn't even want to send her tickets for the Royal Institution Lecture. I insisted on that, and stood over him like an ogress, Margaret, until he addressed the envelope. Then I rang for Quong, and gave him the letter. He was rather cross with me at first. But I laughed and said: 'Isn't it splendid that we know each other well enough to dare to be cross with each other?' And I sat down to the piano and improvised sentimentally on 'The Sailor's Hornpipe.' And Edward sprang up and put his arms round me and said: 'Glad you made me do it, shipmate. Should only have done it under running fire.' All the same, I must have it out with him to-morrow about Mrs Ermyntrude. That's the history of my afternoon, and now I want yours. Dr Edgar does love you, doesn't he? Wasn't I right? Of course I was right. And where's your photograph from that frame, pray? He stole it. He must have stolen it, unless you gave it to him. Edward says he has it in his bedroom. Thief—burglar—and lover! Did he confess his love? Out with it, Margaret. Don't stand there looking dazed."

"I am dazed," Margaret answered. "Yes, I believe he loves me, though he did not say this in so many words. But that was my fault, not his. I checked him. He is under the delusion that he owes what he calls his 'regeneration' to me. It's an absurdity, of course. And yet I assure you I'm touched, as I've never been touched before. An absurdity, of course, that I could regenerate anyone."

"It's no absurdity," Harriet said fiercely. "What do you suppose you did for me? Where do you suppose I should have drifted, but for you? Don't you know there's no woman

on earth more lonely than a divorced woman? Do you suppose I don't realise how you've protected me from impulsive imprudences, and guided me safely into fine and healthy interests? What a fool you must think me!"

"Yes, I do think you're a fool," Margaret answered, her eyes dim for the passing moment. "But a generous-hearted one. Why, you it was who stretched out your hands to me."

"Interplay, interplay all round," Harriet said. "Do you remember those words I came across amongst my father's old papers: 'And there was much playe and entreplaye of musick, divers instruments acting the one on the other in wondrous fashion?'"

Margaret nodded.

"But you're not always going to repulse him?" Harriet asked eagerly. "Surely you love him. I've set my heart on your loving him, just as you set your heart on Edward loving me. Don't tell me that you don't love him. I can't and won't believe it."

"All I can tell you truthfully is that I am dazed," Margaret said dreamily. "I must go and think things out."

She thought them out that night. This man loved her. If she encouraged him ever so little, he would declare his love and ask for hers. Should she let him? She liked him, had been interested in him from the beginning, had learnt to know him, admire him, appreciate him and now honour him. Love him? Ah, that was a different matter. She had never loved anyone since that young silly of a guardsman had stolen her heart, stirred her pulses, roused the woman in her and then gone off and got killed in a frontier war. Looking back now, how absurd, how inadequate he seemed. She had felt passionate love for him, and an unreasoning abandonment. If he had been a Russian political, exiled to Siberia, she would have tramped those hundreds of weary miles across those desolate plains, gladly, thankfully, to be near him, to comfort him, to support him. She would have sacrificed everything to minister to him: youth, strength, freedom. That was love and passion. Passion and love.

Well, and now about this man, this good and fine man who had shown that he loved her. What were her true feelings with regard to him? What could she honestly offer to him? She could offer friendship, comradeship, admiration and respect. That was all. Was it fair to give him only this, in return for the whole love of his heart, his position in the world, the privileges inherent to his position, and the numberless advantages which a man of parts showers unconsciously on those who share his everyday life? Was it fair? She could not give him love, but she might do as thousands of women had done before her, and pretend to give love, for the sake of a home, a husband and a fine position. Why not? She repeated to herself that thousands of women had done this, and had never thought any worse of themselves, and had not been judged harshly by other people. And why not follow their example? Only one more actress to the long list. Why not? After all, what were her prospects? She had none. She was extraordinarily tired, almost as tired as when Harriet found her in San Diego. When she stepped out of Harriet's life, she would have to slip into another set of circumstances, begin all over again, stiffen her back and be ready to fight—for she was not going to be Harriet's pensioner nor Aunt Caroline's slave—no, she must turn out into the arena again, and Lord in Heaven, she was tired—the very thought tired her. One actress the more. Why not? And women could even deceive themselves about it if they chose. They could even pretend to themselves that they were in love, for the sake of not condemning themselves. Blame the women through these long generations? No. The duty of 'getting settled in life' had passed for a tenet as perfectly legitimate and respectable as the duty of saving one's soul. Ah, but that was in the dark ages of a few years ago. The dark ages. Now there was a new order of things. There was a new world of women. There were new openings, new possibilities. And with the new order of things, no excuse for the old habits of deceit, dependence. No—out into the arena she must and would go, and take her chance.

once more in the rough and tumble of life—far better that—far more honest. Now if it had only been that foolish young guardsman . . .

Margaret slept. Harriet, creeping into the room in the middle of the night to see whether all was well with her faithful friend, found her fast asleep, but murmuring a few disconnected words.

She heard: "Dark ages—no excuse—new order—Siberia—frontier war—extraordinarily tired—far more honest—now if it had only been—no—out into the arena . . ."

Harriet bent over her, and gently drew over her the tumbled bedclothes. She waited until the warmth, and perhaps the tender touch, had quieted Margaret's restlessness. Then she stole away, troubled and mystified.

CHAPTER XXIV

BENDING proved entirely obdurate in his attitude towards Mrs Ermyntre. No, he said. Nothing would induce him to court her. She had offended him, and he had done more than his part in sending her those Royal Institution tickets.

"But don't you see, Edward, the situation is impossible," Harriet urged. "Can't you put your pride in your pocket and go to Melbury Road? I'm beginning to wonder whether I have any right to allow you to continue this hostility towards one whom you have always honoured. Of course I'm the cause of it. I understand that perfectly. You don't say much to me about it, and I myself am sensitive on the subject, but naturally I know that Mrs Ermyntre does not approve of our marriage."

"Let her disapprove of it, then," the Captain answered recklessly. "I'm sick and tired of her. I've rebelled. I can't go on consulting her all my life. She has behaved very badly, collaborating with the private detective, that wretched bank manager. Let her stay where she is, or come into line. Let her go on enjoying her Radio-Active Transformations and leave us alone."

"She is leaving us alone," Harriet ventured. "She lets dear little Bess come to us. Surely that is a concession. I think she has behaved splendidly about Bess."

"She can't help herself," Bending laughed. "Bess also has rebelled."

"But you're not really easy in your mind," Harriet insisted. "You're only blustering, shipmate dear. You can't sweep away years of homage in a few days. And she is entitled to her own point of view. Hers *is* the normal

point of view. Sometimes I feel inclined to agree with her. And once when you were in Dublin I nearly went to her to——”

“Now look here, Harriet,” Bending said, “none of that. The Registrar shall marry us next week. And Ermyntrude will have to come into line. But if she doesn’t, what of that, pray? She wants to bully you and bully me because you’ve been divorced. Well, we won’t be bullied, my dear. I tell you I’ve no more patience with her. She has disgusted me. We had a stiff breeze, you know, and I asked her whether it weren’t possible for her to stand by her own sex. Well, it wasn’t possible. All I say, therefore, is that she can stand by herself in her own confounded superiority on her own mountain tops. It’s of no use your asking me to go and see her. I’m as obstinate as ‘the *Canute*’ frozen up in the winter ice. And mind *you* don’t go and see her. She hasn’t invited you to her house, and you’ve no right to put yourself in a false position. She has shown no signs of friendliness.”

“She came the other day, and went away,” Harriet said a little wistfully.

“Well, that’s a nice sort of a visit to pay,” Bending said. “Nice and polite, wasn’t it?”

“She told Margaret that music overcame her,” Harriet said gently.

“Well, I’m glad to learn that something penetrated to her ironclad breast,” he said, rather more kindly. “Come, shipmate, don’t let us worry about her any more. “We’ll get married, and then things will arrange themselves ship-shape, as a matter of course. Will you still take me, although I am so obstinate?”

“Oh Edward, my darling,” she cried, “and what if I ruin your social career—what if I prove a stumbling-block in your way? Those are the doubts which trouble me—and which, I am sure, trouble Ermyntrude. Don’t you see I can’t blame her—she’s on your side too—oh, I would love to have won her—but even if I can’t win her, I cannot blame her—and

you must be friends with her—your little Bess's mother—think of it—go to her and hold out a willing hand—what does it matter if she is hard on me? Things will work themselves out. Go to her, dear."

But he shook his head.

"No," he said determinedly. "She must come into line herself. I'm not going to have one inch of my sweetheart's dignity sacrificed to an absurd family tradition of homage." And then in his own lovable way he added :

"Dear generous-hearted shipmate, will you still marry such an obstinate old devil as myself? Ah, but I forgot you had that celebrated tornado of a temper! That makes things about square, doesn't it? My social career indeed! That's a merry thought for a May morning! I wonder what the whale lady would say about my social career. I was one of her best harpooners, you know, in the wild and wicked past. I think she ought to come over for our wedding, don't you? She and your Bishop of Ely could then be our two witnesses, couldn't they? A bright idea that! Upon my soul, though, I think we'll have to hurry on things with that Registrar, or else you'll be getting some fresh nonsense into your head about my social career. Come along, my dear. We'll steer straight for the office and make enquiries at once. And look here. You have to promise me that you won't approach Ermytrude for any purpose whatsoever—either to offer to renounce me, or to refuse to renounce me. If you won't promise, I swear I'll go straight off to the North Pole in a motor car, and never be heard of again!"

"I promise," Harriet said laughing. "Margaret has been drilling you well."

"Margaret keeps a good look-out from the crow's nest," he answered brightly. "That's what Margaret does."

They had been sitting in St James's Park, watching the Chinese geese which were thoroughly enjoying the lovely June afternoon. They could hear the humming of the bees in the limes; and the butterflies fluttering here and there, added to the joyousness of the moment. They rose now and

sauntered in the direction of Westminster, a happy pair of light-hearted lovers and comrades, destined for each other by nature and circumstance. She waited for him whilst he made enquiries at the Registrar's office ; and when he joined her, his pleasant sailor's face was beaming with delight.

"It's as simple as drowning," he cried. "By Jove, though, I must dash off to keep that appointment with the Board of Trade people. It went clean out of my head. Too much Ermyntude there. Now remember your promise—and my threat."

But for all his defiant words, he could not banish Ermyntude from his rebellious brain. After he had finished his business with the Board of Trade, he nearly sneaked off to Melbury Road. But he checked himself, and looked in at the House to hear an old chum speak in support of the Old Age Pensions Bill. Once again he was seized with a strong wish to see Ermyntude and put things on a comfortable basis.

"Hang it," he argued with himself, "she has been very kind to me in the past. Not very handsome of me to cut up rough now I've climbed the ladder. Shall I go to her? No. She has had her innings of superiority. My turn now. No, she must come into line."

So he did not give in to the traditional homage. He kept severely away from Melbury Road ; but yielded to a half sheepish curiosity to learn how life was shaping itself in that superior neighbourhood. He looked up Hughie at Clement's Inn, much to the pride and delight of the chief and the whole staff, and with the smiling consent of the authorities, marched him off half an hour or so earlier than custom dictated.

"Looking forward to the Royal Institution lecture to-morrow evening, Captain Bending," Hughie's chief said, aglow with pleasure.

Ah, that's more than I'm doing," said Bending. "Tough job that for me. If I make a hash of it, I'll come and kidnap this young fellow, and we'll be off to ocean wastes. I suppose he's doing no good at the law, is he? Not much of a legal

wonder, I daresay? You're not up to much, are you, Hughie, my boy?"

"Oh, he's all right," laughed the chief. "Very astute, I assure you.

"So, you're astute, old man," Uncle Ted said, as they walked up the Strand together. "Will your astuteness kindly tell me the news of Melbury Road? I suppose Bess has told you that I'm sulking. Hard work it is too, Hughie. But first of all, what about you and Bess?"

"Oh, she's still on the high horse, and so am I," Hughie said. "I gave her the long rope, as you told me, but I remained humble and devoted. It didn't answer, Uncle Ted. And so I'm haughty and rather casual; though she still has her long rope, of course. I kept her waiting the other day. She thought a good deal of that. And the other evening when we were to have had dinner alone at Melbury Road, I wired that I had accepted an invitation to a cricket dinner. Good business, sir?"

"Yes," laughed Uncle Ted. "Astute's the word my boy. You'll be Solicitor-General some day. Now let me give you a bit of good news. Miss Bess has seen the fiddle-maker in one of his bad moods. He was horridly rough and unkind to her about her playing. And my shipmate says she took her beating like a brick."

"She would," Hughie put in warmly. "That's Bess all over."

"Yes," Uncle Ted answered. "But now she knows and understands. She probably knew before. Only she's obstinate, like her uncle. Well, that's off my mind. And off yours too, eh?"

"Yes, by Jove," Hughie answered delightedly. "She hasn't said a single word to me about it. And of course I shan't mention it. But she did ask yesterday whether the work at the office had been less dull lately."

"Aha," laughed Uncle Ted. "That's encouraging. Now, you keep on with the long rope, a fair amount of indifference, and a fair amount of theatre tickets—and there'll

be surprising results, young fellow, if I know anything of navigation."

"We're going to the theatre to-night," Hughie said smiling. "I took an extra seat for Mrs Bending. But she wouldn't come. Dr Edgar has forbidden her to go to theatres for a few weeks. But, Uncle Ted, won't you come? Then you'll see Bess and hear all the news direct from her."

"Yes, I'll come," Bending answered. "Nothing special on hand to-night. Wanted to keep a cool head for my lecture to-morrow. But a theatre with you youngsters won't hurt me. By the way, is Mrs Ermyntrude coming to the lecture?"

"Oh yes," Hughie said. "We're all three going together. That was the original arrangement; and I've heard nothing to the contrary. Bess will tell you herself, if she knows. For there's still a sort of coolness between them. Bess doesn't seem to care a scrap and says that it is only temporary, and part of the emancipation, and that Mrs Bending has to learn this is the year 1908. I care though. Mrs Ermyntrude has always been a brick to me, Uncle Ted, and she hasn't allowed me to feel awkward once; though I suppose she knows that Bess recommended me to go and propose to her. Upon my soul, I was nervous at first. I didn't know how to lock her in the face. But she wasn't going to allow that. She was kinder than ever; and she put away the chessmen and explained that Dr Edgar ordered a lighter relaxation. I knew what she meant."

"Bravo, Ermyntrude," Bending exclaimed.

"Hang it all, Uncle Ted, I wish she would hurry up and learn that this is the year 1908," Hughie said quaintly. "Rebellions are beastly uncomfortable things. But I suppose they have to be."

"Oh yes, they have to be," laughed Uncle Ted. "No doubt about that. I rather like them."

"So does Bess, I must say," Hughie remarked, with an indulgent smile. "I never saw her in finer form. The war-path suits her down to the ground. I'm more in love with her than ever. It's hard work being haughty!"

"Yes, my boy," said Uncle Ted, "and hard work being sulky! But if we persevere like heroes, Bess will come off the high horse, and Mrs Ermytrude will come into line. Ah, so that's my ticket. Court Theatre. Dear Ellen Terry in 'Captain Brassbound's Conversion.', Hurrah! My hat off to her. I'll be there."

A couple of hours later Bending was sitting between Hughie and Bess, clapping his hands with might and main when Ellen Terry came on to the stage. He was so excited and delighted, that Bess had to reduce him to silence by whispering: "Easy, easy." And at the end of the second act he stood up and kept calling out: "Bravo, bravo, bravo," as loud as a foghorn, so Bess said. It was a happy evening for them all. The joyous play, the unfailing charm of the actress, and their own pleasure in being together and amusing themselves whole-heartedly together, combined to make a great success of the outing. And Bess and Hughie loved Uncle Ted so dearly and were always so triumphant when they had captured him for themselves, that his presence seemed to bridge over the slight separation caused by the Emancipation, and to banish all need of high horses or haughtiness of mind and manner.

"And to-morrow night he'll belong to the public, Hughie," Bess remarked, as the three comrades left the theatre. "A good thing we had our innings to-night. To-morrow in Albemarle Street he'll have to look and be awfully stiff and severe—and cultured!"

"Oh no, not that," Uncle Ted interposed. "Let me off that, for pity's sake, Hughie! Don't let her ask that of me!"

They laughed, and their thoughts travelled to Ermytrude, as a matter of course. It was characteristic of the hold that she still had on the two family rebels, that they spent quite a moment in being ashamed of themselves for making merry over the sacred word 'culture.' The traditional act of homage over, Bess added:

"Mother has not been half so cultured lately, and she has

not been reading 'Radio-Active Transformations.' She has been spending more time out of doors, chiefly in Kensington Gardens, of course. And the other day she actually sent in an excuse to Mr Theodore Theodore, when he called bringing a new poem. I interviewed him instead, Uncle Ted. I believe I was quite rude about the West wind. But awfully happy! Revenge is sweet. He has bored me for so many long hours, that I was charmed to have the opportunity of telling him how tired I was of everything that hadn't the true ring in it. You should have seen his face of pitying disdain. I described it to mother, and she positively smiled. Mother rather puzzles me."

Hughie touched Bess on the arm.

"I'm off, Bess," he whispered. "You and Uncle Ted want your family yarn."

"Nonsense," she said putting her arm through his. "Aren't you the family? Am I not still engaged to you? Or do you suppose I've become engaged suddenly to Mr Theodore Theodore, or the dear mad fiddle-maker who never takes any notice of me since I played badly on his new fiddle. Uncle Ted, tell Hughie to stay."

"Stay, sir," sang out Uncle Ted, "under pain of instant dismissal from the service. Why, we have to take Bess home first, and then you have to take me home. Shirking your duties, are you? I'll report you to your boss at Clement's Inn. Secrets? No, my boy. It's no secret that Mrs Ermytrude doesn't soften towards my dear shipmate. I only wanted to learn from Bess whether there were any signs of softening."

"I've seen none," Bess said. "Have you, Hughie?"

"None," the young fellow answered a little shyly. "Awfully sorry to say so, but none."

"Mother never speaks of Mrs Rivers or Miss Tressider," Bess continued. "I speak of them. I always tell her when I've been to see them. I've never wanted to hide things from her. I've only wanted to be free. Well, I am free. She doesn't interfere with me in the least. I always tell her where

I've been and what I've been doing. For instance, I went the other night with Miss Tressider to Hoxton. She was giving away the prizes at a gymnastic display. Mother swallowed Hoxton as easily as she used to make me swallow Littlechampton! And a few days ago I went with Mrs Rivers to the London Hospital, when she played to the patients; and to a dance at the Meadow Club given to the Cigar and Boot hands, Miss Tressider's favourites. And you know I've joined a Club, and a Debating Society. I'm beginning to find my own friends for myself."

"And not forgetting your old ones, sea-robbers, Solicitor-Generals and other derelicts, I hope," put in Uncle Ted, winking at Hughie.

"Don't be ridiculous!" she laughed. "You know I'm not fickle. I had to get my freedom. And dear mother had to learn that this is the year 1908. We're not on comfortable terms yet. But that can't be helped. Still I think she has behaved rather well; for of course I'm trying, just at present. I realise that perfectly, thank you. But if she'd give in about Mrs Rivers, my heart would leap out to her again. I don't say I'd renounce the Emancipation, mind you. Not for worlds! But I would conduct it in a much pleasanter spirit, and we'd 'all live happily ever afterwards!'"

"And you think there is no chance of her giving in?" Uncle Ted asked wistfully.

"None that I know of," answered Bess shaking her pretty head. "But I shouldn't worry about to-morrow evening. Mother will, of course, be polite to Mrs Rivers. She couldn't be anything else, could she? But she'll be icebergic. You must expect that!"

"I do," groaned poor Uncle Ted. "Sack alive, I wish my shipmate wasn't going to the lecture. But she has set her heart on hearing me."

"Never mind," cried Bess protectively. "We'll look after Mrs Rivers. And let me tell you something to cheer you on your way. We shall all be so taken up with pride over you, that minor matters will be forgotten."

"She's right, Uncle Ted," Hughie said. "Look here—don't worry—we'll see the thing through—I'll use some of my astuteness—there shan't be any icebergs that I can prevent, We'll make a ripping success of the whole business. All you've got to do, is to go ahead with the lecture, and we'll do the rest!"

Their young voices echoed pleasantly and encouragingly to him as he was arranging his tie the next evening before starting off for the Royal Institution Lecture. He was under their protection. No doubt about that. And his dear shipmate would be safe in their charge. All he had to do, was to go ahead with the lecture and they would manage the rest! And he believed they would, too. Anything was possible to the young. What would become of the world, without the splendid self-belief and dashing confidence of the young generation?

He arrived at Albemarle Street, and found his way to the library where the President and other members of the learned body were already assembled. In due time they accompanied him to the lecture hall which was crowded to its utmost capacity. Everyone who had the right of admission, had used that right; and numbers of distinguished outsiders had begged urgently for the privilege of being present. All London wanted to hear and see the English Arctic explorer. In the front row of the semi-circle, facing the lecturer, sat some of the greatest and most learned men in Europe, a company of rare spirits, wizards of science, oracles of their age and all ages, and with countenances which proclaimed them to be the finest of all aristocrats—the aristocrats of wisdom. But indeed the whole room seemed a sea of splendid heads and thoughtful faces. If for nothing else, it was stimulating to be there, and know oneself in the presence of wonderful men who had pierced into the mysteries and secrets guarded jealously and yielded up only reluctantly by Nature, who had roamed in regions of thought separated by impassable mountain barriers even from the tracts traversed by earnest and faithful disciples, and who were bearing the torch into

the unknown distances, beyond the ken of to-day, beyond the ken of to-morrow.

There to the right sat one of the magicians of chemistry, the exponent of radium, the discoverer of rare earths. Hard by, the daring representative of the joint researches in psychics and physics. Yonder the man who had expounded the liquefaction of gases. To the left, the greatest of the electricians. And near him, the discoverer of wireless telegraphy. At the end of the bench, the greatest British authority on earthquakes, on those ever recurring and mysterious convulsions taking place under the sea and in lonely wastes. Two places off, the distinguished æronaut, the inventor of the Nulli Secundus airship. And on all sides experts in the last results of Time.

Bending's reception was warm, considering the severe academic nature of the atmosphere, and the unwritten code of stern etiquette, which demanded restraint on the part of the lecturer, and reserve on the part of the audience. In spite of his evening dress, he looked the typical English sailor man; and those who knew and loved him, were proud of his quiet but gallant bearing, and of his telling simplicity, to which the demands of the occasion had added an unexpected dignity. And perhaps the remembrance of the dangers through which he and his comrades had passed during those three long years of absence, induced a gravity of manner somewhat alien to his natural geniality of disposition. He told Harriet afterwards that he thought of his old father and mother, and wished they could have been alive to see him in that place of honour, and know that his wild whaling days had, after all, helped to land him there.

Perhaps this thought restrained any undue exuberance of spirits. Whatever the cause, he at least succeeded in keeping himself well in hand. His voice rang out, his descriptions were vivid, his explanations were not too long-winded, and there was a noticeable absence of self-centredness in the whole of his narrative. It was always "*we*" or "*my comrades*, and *I*." It was: "*Petersen and I talked this out. I didn't*"

agree with him, but he proved to be right." It was: "*Larsen's courage and cheeriness strengthened us all.*" He gave every man his due. His pride was in his men, his boat, and in himself, too; but not in himself alone. He became a little excited once over the perfections of *The Canute*; and once or twice, in pointing to the three maps, he waved the rod with just a suspicion of unacademic jauntiness. But on the whole he came successfully through his ordeal; and the subdued applause amidst which he sat down, was all the more valuable because it was born of respectful and critical appreciation, and not of unreasoning enthusiasm. Then the President, the finest and handsomest of those great wizards, rose, and briefly referring to the valuable contribution made to oceanographic science by the expedition of *The Canute*, thanked the lecturer "for his interesting and illuminating address."

The meeting was over. The members and their friends adjourned to the libraries, where the usual microscope displays invited the wonder and attention of even the most ignorant and unscientific outsiders, who were further arrested by an exhibition of beautiful butterflies, each mounted separately under glass. Bending snatched a moment to greet his women folk, including Ermyntrude; and begging them to wait for him, hurried off to join the President in the library beyond. Ermyntrude, Bess and Hughie had not sat with Harriet and Margaret. They had come in separately, and taken the places which they found vacant at the moment; but they had exchanged glances of courtesy and greeting, and had even sent signals of shared pride over the success of their Arctic explorer. Bess had prophesied rightly. Their pride in him was their bond. Ermyntrude had in any case resolved to be friendly. It was, alas, true that Edward and she had not effected a reconciliation; nay, he had not even sought one. But however strained their relationship, she believed that it was only fair on an occasion like this to show a kindly consideration for his tenderest feelings. Moreover, Harriet's music still haunted her; and she had not yet forgotten that interview

with Margaret Tressider. And Bess had been wonderfully winning that afternoon. She had looked at her secretly, and almost cried out: '*Fresh spring leaves—fresh spring leaves.*' She had restrained herself. She dreaded a rebuff. But she noticed a slight change in Bess's manner, no yielding but less defiance. This ghost of a concession softened Ermyntrode more than she knew. She came to Albemarle Street permeated by possibilities unrealised by herself or anyone else. And after the lecture she stood with Bess and Hughie, Harriet Rivers and Margaret, a dignified personage amongst them, a little stiff, of course, but surprisingly human for any one so exalted in mind and spirit. She smiled at Margaret, and made a few remarks to Harriet about the lecture. Her manner towards Harriet was that of a well bred woman who had a slight but friendly acquaintance with another woman, and who was now brought into contact with her in circumstances which encouraged a momentary increase of intimacy. After a short conversation, and a joint examination of the wonderful butterflies with their entrancing combination of colours, she turned to one of the microscope displays, and was soon engaged in studying the sleeping sickness germ. She was still bending down, when a big, coarse featured man who had been staring at this little group from the other end of the library, strolled up to them and paused deliberately in front of Harriet.

"You here," he said in a low voice charged with biting scorn. "This isn't the place for street women like you. Do they know what you are?"

He passed on towards the door, leaving Harriet turned to stone by the suddenness and unexpectedness of the insult. Her companions had all heard. Ermyntrode, who at that moment had rejoined them, heard too. A flush came over her face.

"Was it to you that the man was speaking, Mrs Rivers?" she asked, quietly.

"Yes," Harriet said with simple dignity, forcing herself to speak. "He was my husband, Mrs Bending. He divorced

me When he sees me, he never loses the chance of humiliating me."

Ermyntrude made a few hurried steps forward and intercepted James Blackburn.

"How dare you speak of Captain Bending's fiancée in that tone?" she said imperially "How dare you speak of any woman in that tone?"

"And pray who are you?" James Blackburn asked defiantly, but nevertheless quelled by this handsome personage's stately bearing and queenlike indignation

"Captain Bending's sister in law, she answered, with an access of imperial haughtiness, "and his fiancée's staunch friend. Oh, yes, we know her history—and yours, too Now go Or must I fetch Captain Bending and the President from that inner room Perhaps you will not make that necessary "

He disappeared Bess who alone out of the group had followed her mother, sprang forward to her side

"*Oh mother,*" she cried, with a thrill of love and to her young voice, "*you darling*" sent home,

So with this little drama, acted in a moment same thing in a crowded room, with people hurrying off to their, Ermyntrude came into line.

found Ermyntrude sitting at her bureau writing some letters. She rose at once and came forward to relieve him of his burden.

"Ermyntrude," he said. "I heard about last night. You have made me very happy."

"I have made myself very happy," she answered, pressing his hand. "What beautiful roses, Edward! And roses are especially beautiful this June. But what extravagance, on the eve of your marriage, too!"

"The publisher paid up this morning for the '*Voyage of the Canute*,'" he said boyishly. "Here's the cheque. I wanted you and Bess to see it first. Ah, here is Bess."

"Uncle Ted's cheque from the publishers," Ermyntrude said making room for Bess on the sofa. "I think you ought to go with him, Bess, and watch him deposit it safely at the Bank."

"Come, too, Ermyntrude," Bending said impulsively. "Do you remember how in the old days you used to try and encourage me to save? For every five pounds sent home, five pounds added to it. Perhaps you'll do the same thing now, will you?"

She laughed. She was pleased that he had come, that he had brought her an armful of flowers, that he had given her that little sign of family intimacy by showing her the publisher's cheque, and that he now asked her co-operation in caging it. Moreover she was proud of his success at the Royal Institution. She had now seen for herself the esteem in which he was held. It would be unfair to her generous instincts and the fine impulse on which she had acted, to assert that she came into line only because she had at last realised definitely that Edward was a man of acknowledged position and authority. But, like everyone else, she valued the results of successful attainment; and it is probable that her capitulation had in consequence been made easier to her. She was not conscious of the help which passing events had given her. She only knew that she had fought her battle with herself, and now found herself able to stand side by side

with the woman whom Edward loved. And if she had sacrificed a small portion of her outlook in one direction, she was more than rewarded by that larger vision which breaks upon the mental sight of those who dare to cast aside their narrowing prejudices.

So she laughed and went light heartedly to put on her hat and coat: and a few minutes later, three happy and harmonious Bendings visited Uncle Ted's Bank in Bond Street.

This was the beginning of the new era, and during the few weeks which preceded the marriage between Harriet and Bending, no one could have been kinder and more sympathetic than Ermytrude. Her temperament did not permit her to become more than partially human, and years of time could not have cured her of her culture, but she made stupendous efforts to understand and appreciate that Westminster house hold, and even Paul grew less suspicious of her. He had not liked her at first and he never troubled to be polite to her, until Margaret explained that it would not be 'all right' for Harriet, if he were not kind to Mrs. Ermytrude.

"And you know you weren't quite kind to Bess, were you, Paul?" she ventured.

Paul put down his pulling chisel, and seemed lost in thought.

"I shall let her play on another fiddle some day," he said at last. "Perhaps to-morrow."

"Poor Bess," thought Margaret, smiling to herself. "But at least she will be glad to know that she has been forgiven."

Aloud she said

"Don't you think you ought to give her back her Guarnerius Paul?"

"No," he answered decidedly. "I want it."

"But she probably wants it," Margaret suggested.

"Well, she can't have it," he answered.

Margaret laughed. The old sign post laughed too. He

was in one of his happy moods that day, and had brought home a bunch of faded roses, from a flower woman at Piccadilly, and a basket of over-ripe strawberries. Both these gifts were intended for Harriet and Margaret; and it was only an accident of grim fate that he had eaten up most of the strawberries!

"Mrs Ermytrude thinks Harriet is a very clever person," Margaret went on. "Now that's the last thing I should call Harriet—clever. Mrs Ermytrude must be rather a goose to say that—a Chinese goose."

"Harriet *is* clever," Paul said, with sudden fierceness.

Margaret left him in peace after this, for she knew she had gained her end.

He became friendly once more with Bess, asked her up to his workshop one day, and another day, much to her delight, presented her with a penny bag of cherries. He remained reticent on the subject of the Guarnerius, and, mercifully, he had forgotten about asking her to play on another of his fiddles. He modified his hostile manner towards Mrs Ermytrude, showing signs, by fits and starts, of wishing to be on fairly good terms. But on one occasion, he had a curious outburst of rage with her, caused directly by his extreme anxiety, always latent in his heart to protect Harriet. Ermytrude was chatting with him, affably, as she thought, of his fiddle-making, and his early training at Mirecourt. Harriet had told her his history, and she was really interested in him, and touched by his gifts and his limitations.

"And whilst you were at Mirecourt, did your brother sometimes come to see you?" she asked kindly.

Paul's face flushed with anger. He dashed to the door, and turning round, said fiercely:

"Oh, I know. You're trying to make me speak. People think they can make me speak. But they can't—no use trying—do you hear what I say—not a word——"

He left Ermytrude looking the picture of bewilderment, and sought Margaret.

"Margaret," he cried in that queer excited way of his, "that woman has been trying to make me speak—she needn't think she can get a word out of me—not a word about Robert—she asked if he came to Mirecourt—oh, I know—it wasn't that——"

Margaret understood at once that he was protecting Harriet.

"Paul," she answered gently, "it's all right for Harriet—no need to trouble about Harriet—that woman's a friend—quite a friend—if she weren't a friend, you don't suppose you and I would let her come here. Oh no, I assure you it's all quite right for Harriet—look here—do you know what she brought this morning—this little picture of Captain Bending when he was a midshipman—she valued it very much—but she gave it up to Harriet. If I were you, I should take it down to her now and thank her—on Harriet's behalf you know—you're the right person to do it, of course—you see she has given Harriet great pleasure——"

The angry clouds cleared from Paul's face. He seized the little old-fashioned picture of the dashing young midddy, and rushed into the drawing-room where Ermytrude still sat, petrified and perplexed. His sudden re-appearance put a stop to her petrification, but increased her perplexity.

"Radio Active Transformations were easier than this," she reflected. "I must return to them."

"You gave this to Harriet," Paul exclaimed. "You—I——"

His hand went to his head. There was that expression of intense mental strain on his face, which always called out the best sympathies of those who saw him. But suddenly out of the hopeless confusion of his ideas, came one definite thought to help him. An entrancing smile broke over his face.

"I'll show you my varnish," he said. "You wait here—I'll fetch it now."

He dashed out of the room, nearly knocking down Margaret who had hurried to take charge of the situation. She

explained everything to the bewildered personage on the sofa.

"You see, he was trying to protect Harriet," she said.

"I don't understand," Ermytrude answered. "I had not even mentioned her name."

"That made no difference," Margaret replied smiling. "There are no intervening stages in Paul's reasoning. His brain leaps over details. You mentioned his brother; and that was quite enough to put him on his guard about Harriet. It's his own way of carrying out his brother's instructions to protect her from harm. And offering to show you his varnish, is his own way of thanking you for being kind to Harriet. He probably tried in our fashion, and came straight up against his limitations. Then he suffered. Then he found his own solution to the difficulty. And now he has probably forgotten the whole episode."

"How well you understand him," Ermytrude said.

"Not always," Margaret answered shaking her head. "There are certain hitches in his mental machinery which one ends by taking for granted: but one can never be sure. I don't suppose experts in lunacy are ever quite sure. Wide experience, together with the opportunities of generalising, helps them, of course. And there is that mysterious thing, intuition."

"Ah, the study of the brain must indeed be engrossing," said Ermytrude relapsing into culture, and making an immediate resolution to buy all the newest brain books.

But when she had recovered from this dangerous attack she said:

"May I ask one question of you? Are you never frightened of Mr Stilling?"

"Never," replied Margaret. "There is nothing to be frightened of. On his dark days, you have to leave him alone. And on occasions when he is agitated or cross, very little will turn his attention. A fiddle-back, a good cucumber, a very large banana, some fresh kind of glue. Simple, isn't it?"

"But one could never really be sure of what he would do?" Ermyntrude remarked thoughtfully.

"Can one really be sure of what anyone would do?" answered Margaret quaintly. "Even oneself?"

Ermyntrude laughed softly. She reflected that this was true.

"For instance," ventured Margaret, with a twinkle in her eye, "no one would have thought that you would stand by us. But you did -and magnificently. Now you would not be considered mad, would you? Yet you behaved in an unexpected fashion, unexpected even by yourself, I daresay."

Ermyntrude nodded.

"Yes," she said, "but I would not have it otherwise for worlds, Miss Pressider."

"Well, I'm no more afraid of Paul than of you," Margaret continued. "Of course he has his difficult moods. He is very perturbed just at present. But we all are. Losing Harriet is a serious matter. He feels it in his queer vague way. It is a consolation to me that I shall be here to look after him when they are gone."

"You must remember that you have friends in Melbury Road," Ermyntrude said kindly. "A young girl, fresh as young spring leaves -to use your own words, and a middle aged woman -who has behaved in unexpected fashion."

That was Ermyntrude's tone throughout the weeks which preceded the marriage, and it was no great wonder that she earned the esteem of the whole household, including Quong. Her attitude to Harriet was amazingly gentle and considerate, and without the least indication of moral condescension. She had realised that evening at the Royal Institution, that a divorced woman, however faithfully she may try to rehabilitate herself, remains a target for the arrows of unmercifulness. She had realised that women like herself, secure in their strong citadels of untarnished respectability, had a privilege and a duty which too few recognised: the privilege and duty of standing in front of that target, and warding off the poisoned darts. That episode haunted her throughout the night. She

would not have been Ermyntrude, if she had not conversed with herself about it in her secret journal, and put down her thoughts under the headings of *Moral, Philosophical* and *Human Reflections*, and *Neglected Duties of Women towards Women*. But having duly satisfied her tyrannical intellectual instincts, she gave full play to the emotions of her heart. And the last entry in her book was a curious one. It coincided, oddly enough, with Margaret's conclusions on a separate, though kindred subject: "*A survival, in fact, of the Dark Ages, which one thankfully leaves behind.*"

She made no reference to the painful incident when she went to call on Harriet the next day. It was Harriet herself who spoke of it, in few words, and with the greatness of a simple dignity.

"The wound to my pride, the repeated blow to my regained self-respect were as nothing compared with your healing kindness," she said. "I thank you with all my heart, Mrs Bending."

Ermyntrude remained silent, but pressed her hand gently.

"But last night I again went through that dreadful struggle as to whether I ought to give Edward up," Harriet added. "Numberless times I've made up my mind to come direct to you, and ask that question. I hadn't the heart to come. I was so happy. I loved him so passionately. I couldn't bring myself to give him up—even for his own good."

Ermyntrude closed her eyes.

"I have something to confess to you, Mrs Rivers," she said. "I came to your house one day to ask you to renounce him. It was a great impertinence. But you saved me from disgracing myself. I heard you playing. You were playing the Brahms Sonata in F. Minor. I waited and listened. And as I listened, I was overwhelmed with many emotions and—well—I went away."

Harriet's face lit up for one moment, and then was clouded by a sudden but stern resolve.

"But you can ask now—you can ask now," she cried with a noble earnestness.

"I don't ask it now," Ermyntrude answered, "I don't wish it now—it was absurd, ridiculous—and it would not have been for his own good. Edward and you were made for each other—you understand him as no one else would—and, for the rest, I've learnt, Mrs Rivers—I've learnt—and I hope he'll prove worthy of your unselfish nature."

Harriet rose up and turned impulsively to the piano. There were some tears on her cheeks, but she brushed them heedlessly away.

"Shall I play that Brahms to you now?" she said eagerly. "I should love to play it."

For answer, Ermyntrude drew nearer to the piano; and Harriet, striking a few chords, began the music of the great distances, the music of the secret of hidden things, the music which had sent forth its message before, and thrilled Harriet afresh, charged with larger meaning and with an intense appeal.

So these two women grasped each other's hands across the chasm of temperament and tradition, which might only too easily have left them eternally unreachable.

After this, Harriet's happiness grew apace. Her mind was now at rest with regard to Bending's social career, and the sting of James Blackburn's insult was losing its power. She spoke of it, of course, to Bending; but he folded her in his arms, and then lit a fresh pipe.

"Hold hard, shipmate," he said. "That man's my job. He has got to be told to steer clear of our whaler, else he'll be sunk. Don't be alarmed. I'm not going to kill the brute. Now do I look as though I'm yearning to be hanged? All the same, he's my job. You just attend to your own affairs, my dear girl. Have another tornado. You seem to have had a pretty bad one yesterday, from your own account."

"And Margaret was an angel," Harriet said, hanging her head. "And so was Quong. You don't know how ashamed I am. Will you mind much, I wonder? I shall try very hard to control my tempers, but they'll break loose some-

times—it's no use your ignoring that painful fact. Of course I shall always be able to say I'm sorry at once. But that's not from virtue. That's from inheritance—from my mother."

"A very precious inheritance," he said, smiling at what he called secretly 'her beloved frankness.' "Have no fear, sweetheart. Your tornadoes will never wipe my faults off the face of the globe. But I'll try to be as angelic as Margaret—and Quong! Margaret's going to miss your tornadoes. I see that well. She's on my mind. Hang it all! Why can't she give Edgar a little encouragement? If she wouldn't be so confoundedly impersonal, he'd be on his knees at once. That man loves her. And she pretends not to notice his devotion. She's a perverse wretch."

"The wind bloweth where it listeth, Edward," she said gently. "Margaret probably knows what she wants."

But Margaret was on her mind, too, and she took thought for her in numberless ways. It was arranged that she should remain on at No. 30 Old Queen Street and see after Paul during Bending's and Harriet's absence in Australia, where they had arranged to go for their honeymoon outing. All further plans were left in abeyance until their return, in about five or six months' time. But Harriet continued to pay secret visits to several of Margaret's particular intimates, and enjoined on them to invite themselves to stay in the house. The Polish photographer, Gerald and Rosa Meir, two special Suffragist friends, the founder of the Meadow Girl's Club in Euston Road, a Russian political refugee and his wife, and an Irish authoress were amongst those on whom Harriet surreptitiously called. But, naturally, it was to the loving care of the two clericals, Gerald and Rosa Meir, that she really confided Margaret's welfare. They had known and loved her for years. They would not fail her.

"Watch over her, watch over her," she repeated as she was leaving them; and then burst into tears. To Margaret she merely said that she hoped she would invite some of her friends to the house, and that she would not allow herself to be lonely and dull.

"I can't promise about the loneliness," Margaret answered smiling a little sadly. "But I swear about the dullness, Harriet. Never more on earth am I going to be dull. No, I have scores of schemes in my clever ^{or} brain. I may even write a *Madagascan Manual of conversation*! That alone would take up centuries of my time. But I can't pretend that I shall not miss your tornadoes. You wouldn't like me not to miss them, would you? No, I thought not. Such faithful old friends as they are!" Don't worry about me, dear. I'm fearfully happy over your marriage. And you see, I'm still wanted. You leave me in charge of Paul, and with a good deal of authority over your monetary matters. I hope I shan't be dishonest, but one can never tell.

And she added:

"Still wanted. That's, after all, the only thing which makes life worth having. Still wanted. Poor little Sparrow-bird! I often think of her."

They were in the drawing-room, and Margaret was ministering to the fern in the oak chest near the window, whilst Harriet was entertained by record music which had arrived from London that morning. She thrust it aside impetuously and hurried into Margaret's side.

"Can't you see, won't you see that Dr. Edgar loves you passionately and wants you as Edward wants me?" she cried with urgent intensity.

"Yes," answered Margaret gravely. "But this is the ghastly part, Harriet. *I don't love him*. That's the irony of life, isn't it? At present."

The door opened and Quong, politely admitted Dr. Edgar. He saw at once that he had broken in upon a solemn conclave, and he said:

"Ah, I'm disturbing you—some secret plans—some dangerous schemes. I'll go up to Paul, and have a fiddle-making lesson if he's in the humour. You know he has decided that I'm to give up surgery! I'm not hurrying off. I have four hours to spare, and I intend to spend them here."

They did not attempt to detain him ; for his sudden entrance had disconcerted them, and they were glad to have the chance of regaining an outward, if not an inward composure. But after he had left them, Harriet sank into a chair and said reproachfully :

"Well, I don't understand how you have the heart not to love that man."

"Nor I," Margaret answered with an uneasy laugh.

She also sank into a chair ; and the two friends sat on in silence, scarcely stirring : for their tenseness had not yet yielded to an easier adjustment. But suddenly the door was again opened, and to their unutterable astonishment, Quong announced Miss Benbow and Mr William Tressider. Margaret, like a good old warhorse, recovered her buoyancy, as though by magic. Harriet, who had quite forgotten that Brother William had behaved in an uncourteous fashion on his previous visit, and that he had acted as private detective to Mrs Ermytrude, greeted him and his ancient Aunt with her unfailing kindness of manner ; and seeing the mischief sparkling in Margaret's eyes, the grim amused expression on Aunt Caroline's face and the slight cloud of disquietude on Brother William's countenance, prepared herself for a bit of real fun.

"Quite a family party," remarked Margaret gaily. "No, don't go, Harriet. Family parties are at their best when safely chaperoned by other people, aren't they, Aunt Caroline?"

"We must apologise for coming, Mrs Rivers," Miss Benbow said, waving her hand to dismiss Margaret's terrestrial existence. "Of course William has no business here, having shown his decided disapproval of you in the past. Don't look confused, William. Facts are facts."

"I am very glad to see Mr Tressider," Harriet said, smiling at Aunt Caroline. "I have no feelings against any relation of Margaret's."

"No, I don't suppose you have, my dear," Aunt Caroline answered, extraordinarily tenderly for her hard nature. "I

shouldn't imagine that you know what bitterness means. A good thing Margaret has not taught you. She knows."

"Pardon me, Aunt Caroline," interposed Margaret. "I used to know. My knowledge is now lost. To quote the Apocrypha, it is as 'a ship that passeth over the waves of the water, which, when it is gone by, the trace thereof cannot be found, neither the pathway of the keel in the waves.'"

"The Apocrypha is a book I never read," Miss Benbow said, waving her hand again.

"You miss a good deal, then, Margaret said. "You ought to ask your new companion to read it to you."

A grim smile stole across Aunt Caroline's face; but she waved her hand once more, and addressed herself solely to Mrs. Rivers.

"This leads me directly to the excuse I wished to make to you, both for bringing William, and for coming uninvited to your house," the old lady said. "William is here instead of a companion. I have no companion. She left yesterday. William deemed it unsuitable for a person of my advanced age to drive about alone in a taximeter."

"A taximeter!" exclaimed both women in amazed surprise. Even the changeling allowed himself the liberty of a smile.

"Yes," continued Aunt Caroline. "There's nothing wonderful in that, is there? Haven't we all to be modern now-a-days? And a horrid nuisance it is in some ways. Oh yes, I made up my mind when Miss Sparrow died that I must conform to the 'new order of things.' I wish the new order of things only comprised taximeters. It would be simple enough, then. Well, I have not learnt my lesson yet, evidently. When I saw you last, Margaret, I had had four fresh companions. Wasn't it four, William?"

William nodded assent.

"Well, since seeing you, I've had seven more," the old lady continued. "Seven. It's no use mincing matters. My modern methods have not made any impression on these modern products. They all dashed off like motors. And

yet I spent a good deal of money on theatre tickets, and seats for the Queen's Hall Concerts—a new departure that, Margaret.”

Margaret sat stiff and silent. She knew well what was coming. William glanced at her furtively, and wondered whether she would yield to Aunt Caroline's renewed offer, with an increase of another £2500 on the settlement and another third on the salary. He seriously hoped she would give in. He was beginning to feel that his aged relative claimed too much of his time and attention, even though he was to inherit the bulk of her goodly fortune. He mourned over Miss Sparrow's death. He had become tired of engaging new companions. He longed for the more congenial recreation of golf. Suddenly he had heard through Mrs Ermytrude Bending that the date of the marriage was now definitely fixed. Here was a ray of hope. Margaret would be 'out of work.' He was not indiscreet enough to advise Aunt Caroline to make further overtures to her niece. He merely made the bald statement that the date of the marriage between Mrs Rivers and Captain Bending was now definitely fixed. But this piece of news, following on the departure of Sparrowbird's eleventh successor, induced the forlorn old woman to try her luck again with the relative whom she really loved in her own metallic way. She did not deign to discuss the matter with William. She said: "I shall offer her the whole of her present salary, instead of two-thirds; and I shall settle £7500 on her instead of £5000. It's no use raising any objections, William. I've made up my mind. And I don't want your precious advice."

Poor William did not wish to raise any objections, or give any of his precious advice. All he hungered for was peace and golf. He considered that peace was cheap at £7500—nay, even at £10,000. He had fair visions of free uninterrupted times for golfing—a pleasure cruelly interfered with lately by Aunt Caroline's continuous domestic and social upheavals. Yes, Margaret must be secured by hook or crook.

So he sat watching, waiting, and one might even say, praying. At last the crisis came. He gave a sigh of relief, and turned the whites of his eyes up to the ceiling.

"Well now, to go straight to the point," Miss Benbow said bravely, though her voice trembled a little. "I hear that you are going to be married shortly, Mrs Rivers. Margaret will thus be deprived of her situation. I have come to offer her once more the post of companion to me. She refused before: but perhaps she may reconsider her decision, now that the moment has come for losing you."

Harriet rose, and turning to William, suggested that they should take a little stroll in the Park and see the rhododendrons, now at their best. He was willing enough to escape, knowing that his presence could not help matters, and might even complicate them. And though he would not have owned it to himself, Harriet interested him. He tried afterwards to pretend to himself that he had not enjoyed that stroll in the Park with this beautiful and kind woman. He never succeeded in his attempt. But that was his secret, buried deep in his banker's breast.

Meanwhile the two time-honoured combatants, left alone, remained silent, each waiting for the other to begin.

"Well," said Aunt Caroline at last.

"Well," said Margaret casually.

"What have you to answer?" Aunt Caroline asked, a little anxiously, perhaps.

"Nothing," Margaret replied. "You know we threshed out the whole subject."

"I increase the value of my offer," the old lady urged. "I offer now the whole of your present salary, and a settlement of £7500."

"I thought I had made it quite clear that I was not to be bought with money," Margaret said gently.

Miss Benbow waved her hand.

"The dog has gone," she continued. "I shall probably keep a motor. I may even have the house brightened up. All the eleven complained that it looked depressing. I think

they were right. On the whole they interested me a good deal, those modern products. They all had spirit. They all had opinions—very strong opinions. Now poor little Miss Sparrow had no opinions, and no spirit. Perhaps you will admit that much.”

“No, she had no spirit,” Margaret answered. “You’d crushed it all out of her.”

Aunt Caroline winced, but she went out valiantly :

“Number Three disliked reading aloud. Number Four disliked the dog. Number Five disliked cards. Number Six disliked Mecklenburgh Square. Number Seven disliked the servants. The remaining four disliked everything—including me, of course. The truth is I’ve outlived my time. The type I used to deal with successfully has died out. I hear you say again, ‘What a good thing!’ I daresay it is a good thing for them. But exceedingly inconvenient for me, Margaret. Now are you coming to me? You needn’t be frightened of my so called tyranny. If I ever had a tyrannical spirit—which I doubt it has now been quelled. I scarcely recognise myself. Well, are you coming?”

Margaret shook her head.

“No, Aunt Caroline,” she said kindly “I consider the subject closed.”

“And may I dare ask what you intend to do now you are thrown out of employment?” enquired Miss Benbow a little maliciously.

“I shan’t be thrown out of work for five or six months,” Margaret replied smiling. “I shall remain on here for the present and take care of our fiddle-maker until Mrs Rivers’s return. After that——”

“Ah, perhaps she has provided for you,” Aunt Caroline said sharply. “That’s it, is it?”

“I should not allow her to do anything of the sort,” Margaret retorted. “I desire to be no one’s pensioner. When she found me in San Diego, she needed me as much as I needed her. There is no lonelier human being in the whole world than a divorced woman who is trying to redeem herself and

regain her position. Now all that is altered. She has the dauntless heart of Edward Bending to protect her. 'A wider soul than the world was wide.' My work for her is nearly over. But when I go from here, it won't be to you, Aunt Caroline. I shall probably work for some cause. That's what I am best suited for. Believe

The door opened and Dr Edgar appeared. He was dumbfounded on seeing his ex-patient, and was beating a hasty retreat, when Aunt Caroline, with that grim smile of hers, said :

"Don't go away like that. Men have no moral pluck. Sit down. Don't be frightened of me. I bear you no malice."

He laughed and sat down by her side ; though at first he gave one or two longing glances in the direction of the door.

"I have never understood," observed Aunt Caroline, "why people who have quarrelled and are not on so called 'terms' try to avoid each other. That's when they should become interesting to each other—provided of course that they have a horizon "

"And brains to help them to cope with a new beginning and a new set of ideas," remarked Margaret.

"Are not brains included in a horizon?" Aunt Caroline said meekly. "Or can you have brains without a horizon, and a horizon without brains?"

"I should say that they can exist independently of each other," laughed the Doctor. "But in conjunction they should form an irresistible weapon with which to overcome the difficulties of temperament and circumstance."

"Ah, well, I evidently haven't them in conjunction," said Aunt Caroline. "And yet I've used my brains—it has always been admitted that I had brains—and my horizon has recently been conceded to me - in trying to deal with eleven interesting modern products. And I have failed, Dr Edgar. Margaret and I were discussing this failure when you came in. I have been trying to persuade her to be the Twelfth—I should add the permanent Twelfth. For after a while, changes be-

come fatiguing. In these modern times it appears to be difficult to replace a companion. This is not the case with Doctors. That is why I owe you no grudge. You were so easy to replace. Since being abandoned by you, I've had one new medical attendant and eleven companions. An instructive proportion, isn't it?"

"Yes, but you see women are on the strike in all departments," Dr Edgar said. "They are demanding freedom, justice, fair play, socially, legally, politically—and also immunity from cruel and petty tyranny, administered chiefly by their own sex, I grieve to say."

"Ah, you're thinking of Miss Sparrow," Aunt Caroline put in testily.

"Yes, I was thinking of her," he answered quietly, and he repeated his words '*immunity from cruel and petty tyranny*'.

There was a moment of silence, and during that interval, there rose a vision of poor little Sparrowbird before each of these three people who had known the details of her life. Dr Edgar and Margaret saw her as they found her that evening on Hampstead Heath, after their long hours of anxious and painful search. Miss Benbow saw a little patient figure stooping over her bed, bringing her shawls, arranging cushions, picking up her knitting, shutting out the draughts and accepting her many scoldings with submissive quietude. The conduct of the eleven encouraged Miss Benbow to believe that the little timid woman in this vision of vanished days had been a real friend whom she had treated badly and recklessly cast aside.

The spell broke. The vision faded away. Aunt Caroline recovered herself.

"Margaret says my type is doomed," she remarked grimly. "Perhaps it is. And perhaps it is just as well that it is doomed. I have no wish to defend myself or my type. But meanwhile I survive the impending ruin. I need a permanent Number Twelve. Petty tyranny in Mec' lenburgh Square is dead. It died with Miss Sparrow. I have always liked my niece. When you were attending me, do you

remember how pleased I was at the prospect of seeing her again? She's losing her position here, you know. She says something about working for cause. I suppose she means Women's Suffrage. Well, she can work for that in Mecklenburgh Square. Why don't you persuade her to come?"

"No," said Dr Edgar decidedly. "No. Never."

He seemed greatly stirred. He rose abruptly from his chair, and stood staring at a beautiful silvery seascape over the mantelpiece, his back turned resolutely both to Margaret and Aunt Caroline.

"I suppose he is thinking of Miss Sparrow," Aunt Caroline said crossly. "Well, well, it can't be helped."

"I'm not thinking at all of Miss Sparrow," he answered veering round suddenly. "I'm thinking—I'm thinking only of my . . ."

He checked himself. Some expression on Margaret's face arrested him. Was there a dumb pleading in her eyes? Was there a shadow of weariness round her mouth? Was there a tired listlessness in her attitude which he had noticed more than once lately? He controlled himself immediately for her sake, and made up his mind to wait.

"I'm thinking only of—of her unfitness for the post," he said with great effort—"and of your unfitness--to--to fulfil all you would--wish--to do--and be. There would be—a tremendous fiasco. I could not advise her--to--to accept your offer. I beg you will forgive—my outspokenness. There is no malice in it. I think we remain friends, don't we—since I have been so easy to replace."

"I think we do," Aunt Caroline answered grimly. "I think we do. But I am not quite sure. Why don't you speak, Margaret? Why do you sit there like an image—a well-dressed one, I admit. I admire your taste in clothes. You won't enjoy being shabby, will you? Why don't you speak?"

"Because I have nothing to say," Margaret replied brightly, rousing herself from the reverie into which she had fallen.

"Except that, if you wish, I will gladly come and read the Apocrypha to you sometimes, and take you out in a taximeter. And I'll find Number Twelve for you. I promise you that. I won't rest until I have found Number Twelve for you."

"Very handsome of you, I'm sure, Aunt Caroline said. "I accept. In these days my type has to be thankful for crumbs. I thank you. William has meant well, but he has not been successful. Ah, here he is. Well, William, it's no good. I've tried and failed. Sacrificed my dignity and got nothing. Margaret refuses to come to Mecklenburgh Square. I don't blame her. But she has offered to read the Apocrypha to me, and I am much obliged to her. No, I don't blame her. Don't frown, William."

But William saw his favourite golf links fading into the dim, dim distance, and he was, at once filled with an indignation which he pretended to believe was entirely impersonal and righteous.

"I blame her," he said, in his most severe and pompous manner. "Life contains Christian obligations which we cannot and dare not ignore. We are all dependent on each other. We look to each other for help, encouragement, strengthening. The keynote of our existence should be unselfishness. Our own pleasures should be our last consideration. Our first consideration should be duty—family duty—we —"

"William, this isn't the City Temple," Margaret put in cheerfully. "This is Mrs. Rivers's drawing-room. You must ask her permission if you want to preach us a sermon."

"And I shan't give it, Mr. President," Harriet said kindly, but decidedly.

"Quite right, my dear," remarked Aunt Caroline with a twinkle in her eye, and nodding pleasantly to Dr. Edgar. "Well, I suppose we ought to be going, having failed successfully in our undertaking, and before William commits himself further. Very good of you to have put up with us, my dear. I shall always think of you with pleasure—why, I don't

know I must say I should like to have seen your Captain Bending

"Don't go, don't go, Harriet urged. "Wait and see him. He'll be here soon, the darling."

"Will you undertake not to preach, William? Aunt Caroline said severely. "And not once to refer to such an out of date thing as family duty?"

They all laughed and it must be owned that Brother William stood his ordeal with admirable good nature, which was recognised and appreciated by the entire little company. Dr Edgar rallied to his side and the two men plunged into an animated conversation on golf and became dead to the unimportantness of the unglorious world.

But it was not long before the door was flung wide open and Uncle Ferdinand in arm with Bess and Hughie, came joyously into the room. They formed a pleasant and touching picture of united happiness. Aunt Caroline's steely old eyes grew softer. And this was all the greater tribute to the sweetness of the picture since he had no means of knowing that Uncle Ferdinand, all in happy-go-lucky irresponsibility, had been secretly but surreptitiously contriving to make these two young couple steer side by side towards the same harbour, in spite of the Emancipation. Paul had of course helped him by administering the famous rebuff. But he had planned the rest. He was fond of Hughie, in any case, but he argued to himself that if Bess saw distinct evidences of his liking for the young fellow, she would be unconsciously influenced in the right direction. So he lost no opportunity of showing his fixed appreciation of the Solicitor General in a dozen different ways. It had been, *'By Jove, what am I thinking of! Hughie will see after this for me, of course.'* And, *'What's that astute young rascal Hughie? Tell him I insist to come and help me make my will this evening, free of charge.'* And he had told them that afternoon, as they came away from the Horse Show, that his shipmate and he had taken counsel together and had decided that Bess and the Solicitor General were to sign

the marriage register for them. The Bishop and the whale lady were to be thrown overboard. They would not be wanted. They might stay respectively in their cathedral and on their whale island.

Bess laughed, turned impulsively to Hughie, caught his face and kissed it.

"Isn't it sweet of them, Hughie?" she cried. "And when our turn comes, we'll make them do it for us, won't we?"

"All's well, my boy," Uncle Ted whispered later. "The Emancipation isn't going to work any harm to you now. Only good. You'll both love each other in a larger way that's all."

Then the trio, brimming over with happiness, had appeared suddenly in Harriet's drawing-room: and Aunt Caroline, without any knowledge of the secret which Margaret and Harriet shared with Edward Bending, was as touched as they were by this charming vision of the grey-haired sailor man arm in arm with Bess at her brightest and prettiest, and Hughie as fresh-looking a young English fellow as ever played cricket, in all senses of the word.

Harriet jumped up to greet them, and brought them straight to Miss Benbow.

"Here is my Arctic Explorer," she said, "and Bess, his niece—my niece, and Hughie, his nephew to be—my nephew to be. This is Miss Benbow, Margaret's Aunt, Edward, my darling."

"I know," he said. "It's Aunt Caroline, isn't it? I've heard of you. I've heard a great deal of you."

"I've heard of you," Aunt Caroline answered on her mettle. "But you didn't get to the North Pole, did you?"

"No, you're right," he answered, laughing good temperedly.

"I suppose you'll be making another vain attempt some day," she asked.

"If my shipmate will come with me," he said pointing to Harriet.

"Ah, perhaps in this wonderful new order of things, it's a woman that will find the North Pole, and the South Pole

too, for the matter of that, Aunt Caroline remarked. 'Certainly the men have been a long time about it. Well, I'm pleased to see you. I never have disliked sailor men. I'm glad of your honours. You probably deserve them. I congratulate you on them, and on your fiancée.'

"Thank you, Aunt Caroline," he said simply. "I'm a lucky dog. And I know it."

But suddenly Bending looked up and realised the presence, in the room of Emyntides' private detective. His face changed.

'By Jove,' he exclaimed under his breath, 'what's that man doing here. He has no business here. He—'

"Easy, easy, Uncle Ted," advised Bess, who had just returned to the scene where he was sitting with Miss Benbow. 'That episode over, I shouldn't be angry, if I were you. Margaret's brother is fine. And Miss Benbow's nephew. And mother-in-law. What a good remembrance. A fresh voyage in fact. Oh, I should like to go with them all so happy, too. I should like to be a young man, too.'

"Yes, but control that. Bess. He would be unable to control his rising anger. I wish my soul he has no business to be here. I know."

At a later moment William, Aunt Caroline put in. 'No, he has no business here. He had no wish to come. But I wished. I had an important proposition to make to Margaret. William's poor man, was obliged to accompany me in the taxi. I am without a companion.'

"Did you come to a conclusion?" Bending said, amused, in spite of his vexation. "You're up to date, Aunt Caroline."

"Why do you call me Aunt Caroline?" he asked.

"Because I could not call you anything else if I tried," he answered.

"He doesn't mean to be rude," Bess said, hastening to explain her dear Uncle Ted, about whom she was anxious this afternoon.

"No, my dear, I understand," Aunt Caroline said, smiling kindly at the pretty young girl. "I understand. He means to be pleasant—at least to me. What he means to be to my nephew, I have no means of knowing."

"I suppose you think I ought to make an effort to be pleasant to him," Bending said surlily.

"Oh dear no," retorted Aunt Caroline. "One could not expect that of you. William has incurred your indignation."

"Yes," said Bending fiercely. "Do you know my name for him? I call him the private detective."

"Easy, easy, Uncle Ted," Bess whispered lovingly.

"A very good name, too," Aunt Caroline said. "William has always had the habit of forgetting out everything. It's his nature, as it's yours to rush off in search of that North Pole and never find it. But in justice to William, I must own that in this particular instance, I am the one to blame. I urged him on in the beginning - and nice fools we've both made of ourselves."

"Does he think that?" Bending asked, beginning to be slightly appeased.

"Oh, you could not get a man to think he had made a fool of himself," Aunt Caroline answered. "And certainly not William—a prosperous bank manager. "But I've no doubt that he is feeling very uncomfortable, now you've come. Perhaps I'd better take him away. I've placed him in a false position, and I suppose I ought to extricate him from it."

"No, don't go," Bess said eagerly, laying her hand in Aunt Caroline's, with all the trust and confidence of warm-hearted youth. "Uncle Ted, dear, do put your bristles down—don't drive Miss Benbow away. It is lovely being here, isn't it? In this sweet meadow room, and with that charming view of the Park. And in the company of these dear people. I felt free and happy from the minute I entered the house. I, too, came when I had no business to come, didn't I, Uncle Ted? Yes, I arrived uninvited, and settled down as if I had been born here. Oh, I shall never forget my first visit to Old Queen Street."

"Nor I mine," said Aunt Caroline, holding Bess's hand contentedly, and feeling the glow of something like happiness in her wicked old heart. "The first time I came here, it was with the deliberate intention of making myself disagreeable. But directly I saw Mrs. Rivers, I--well, I changed my mind."

"By Jove!" Uncle Ted exclaimed. "I'll go straight away and put myself on terms with the enemy."

"Uncle Ted is a darling at heart," Bess confided to Miss Benbow. "But of course he has spirit."

"He wouldn't be a sailor man if he hadn't," remarked Miss Benbow indulgently.

"No," continued Bess. "And he feels rather strongly on the subject of Mr. Fressider."

"Naturally," said Miss Benbow. "I should if I were he."

"Yes," agreed Bess bravely. "So should I. Even as it is, I'm not too fond of Mr. Fressider. Do you know, I, too, have a name for him. I call him the changeling. He seems to me hopelessly unlike a brother of Miss Fressider's. I'm sure he's a changeling."

Aunt Caroline chuckled.

"Perhaps he is," she answered. "I never thought of it. Poor William. A private detective and a changeling. Certainly a remarkable combination for a respectable bank manager. And you consider him unworthy of the honour of being my niece's brother, yes?"

"Yes," said Bess staunchly. "She's one in ten thousand."

"You are fond of her, then?" the old woman asked.

"I love her, and Mrs. Rivers, both of them," the girl replied eagerly. "You have no idea what they've done for me. And the fiddle-maker, too. I shall never forget that first day of freedom—that splendid beginning of the Emancipation."

"The Emancipation?" Miss Benbow repeated. "From what?"

"From bondage, from the old order of things, from the

"And how did the half-witted fiddle-maker help, pray?" enquired Miss Benbow. "I suppose he is half-witted."

"Yes, I suppose so," Bess admitted. "But he is a great genius. The real thing, you know. He helped me by being the real thing. That's all I can say. I came here to see Mrs Rivers—uninvited. She was out. Mr Stilling rushed in to find a tool he had dropped. He told me about fiddle-making, and about varnish. I could see at once that he was the real thing. I shall always think that he opened the doors for me, and the others welcomed me in."

"And your mother?" asked Aunt Caroline. "What has she to say about the Emancipation?"

"Mother has had to learn that this is the year 1908," Bess said strictly.

"It strikes me we all have to learn that, Aunt Caroline returned. "Well, is she learning? Has she learnt?"

"Yes, splendidly, generously," Bess answered. "Beyond all my hopes and expectations."

"Ah," said Miss Benbow with a twinkle in her eye. "I must find out which method she used."

Meanwhile Bending had approached the further end of the room, where William and Hughie, Margaret, Harriet and Dr Edgar were gathered together. In spite of his good intentions, the Captain did not look in the least conciliating. He had the appearance, indeed, of advancing to pounce on his prey. Margaret was intensely amused, and recovered some of her light-heartedness which had gone straying this afternoon. Harriet, on the other hand, became a little anxious, and made an impetuous movement forward. William coughed pompously, and tried to remember the dignity of his position as Manager of the County & Westminster Bank. The golf-links faded from his mind. He thought only of his inner sanctum at the Bank, and wished himself safely in the seclusion of Lothbury. Bess surveyed the situation from afar, not quite re-assured about Uncle Ted's bristles. Aunt Caroline, wicked old sinner, chuckled silently. Dr Edgar feared that Bending would not be able

to resist striking the private detective full in the face. Hughie went one better, and believed that Uncle Ted would knock him down. It was a critical moment; and it is difficult to say what might have happened, if Harriet had not put her hand on her shipmate's arm and said:

"Ah, darling, so here you are. You haven't seen Mr Tressider yet, have you? It's kind of him to have brought Miss Benbow here this afternoon, isn't it? I've been pleased to welcome him to my house."

Bending's pugnacity diminished at the sound of Harriet's voice. He remembered in time that this was his shipmate's vessel, and that he had come to put himself on terms with the enemy. He stretched out his hand, not very willingly, still he stretched it out, and looking at William somewhat fiercely, he said:

"Yes, it was good of you to bring Aunt Caroline, sir. Not very comfortable for you, I daresay."

"It was my duty, sir," William answered, taking refuge in his piety. "Mrs Rivers understands that I should not have intruded on her, except for family duty."

"William, William, you promised not to speak of family duty," said Margaret reproachfully.

"What do I hear about that old-fashioned commodity, 'family duty'?" asked Aunt Caroline from the other end of the room. "I have sharp ears, you know. Be careful, William."

There was a general laugh, in which William himself joined.

"I beg your pardon, Aunt Caroline," he said quaintly. "It slipped out. I was escaping from one pitfall, and tumbled into another."

And fortified by the returning sense of mental ease and physical safety, he allowed himself to add with a characteristic commingling of pompousness, penitence and courtesy:

"I was going to remark, and will still remark if I am permitted—that Mrs Rivers's agreeable—indulgence has converted that—that duty—pardon me, again, Aunt Caroline—has converted that—duty into a—privilege."

"Bravo, William," Margaret said, holding out her hand to him. "Bravo."

And she whispered :

"I won't desert you. I'll help you out with the old lady. I'll secure the Twelfth."

"Bravo, sir," Bending exclaimed generously; and he lowered his lance, retired from the lists and retreated to Aunt Caroline and Bess.

"I'm safer here," he said smiling. "No knowing what I mightn't want to do or say, if I remained over there much longer."

Harriet also thought he was safer now; but, anxious to prevent the possibility of any further strain, she sat down at the piano, and began playing some of the airs from 'Carmen,' singing them softly at the same time. Then she strummed some waltzes, and wandered about bewitchingly from one melody to another, until she had worked her way into 'Black Eyed Susan,' and 'The Midshipmite.'

"Will you sing, darling?" she cried light-heartedly. "And we'll join in the chorus. What a pity we haven't the concertina!

And to persuade him she began :—

"With a long, long pull, and a strong, strong pull,
Gaily, lads, let us go.
And we'll drink to-night to the Midshipmite,
Singing cheerily, lads, Yo ho!"

Bending leapt to her side, and sang his sailor's best, the chorus supporting him nobly. Even Aunt Caroline mumbled something about 'cheerily lads, Yo ho!'

When the music was over, Dr Edgar said to Margaret in a whisper :

"I told Mrs Bending that Mrs Rivers's gift of music was a reconciling one. But her atmosphere is a reconciling atmosphere."

"Yes," Margaret answered. "I felt that from the beginning. Even at school."

"You are going to miss her badly, I fear," he said kindly. "You're fretting, I'm afraid."

"Yes," she answered. "Paul and I are both fretting. But of course there's no sense in that. We wouldn't wish to have anything different. And we love Bending. He will make her very happy. I suppose we shall be able to pull ourselves together, when the time comes. A week from to-day—think of it. Four years and a half since we burnt my palmistry cards, and threw my crystal into San Diego Bay. Four and a half happy years. The happiest years of my life."

"Some friends remain, Margaret," he said simply. It was the first time he had called her by her Christian name.

"Yes," she said gently. "I know that. And you are one of them."

"Yes," he answered gravely ; and to prevent himself from saying more than those few unselfish words, he rose and joined the others who were clustering round Aunt Caroline. Margaret followed him. The old lady turned at once to her niece, and said :

"Well, Margaret, I've had an eventful afternoon, haven't I ? Not successful from a business point of view, since you refuse to come and be Number Twelve. But I've forgiven an enemy, witnessed the harmless encounter of two hostile persons, and met the famous Polar Explorer face to face. Ah, he did not manage to find that North Pole, did he ? But let that pass. Now remember you have undertaken to find Number Twelve, and you have offered to read the Apocrypha to me, and occasionally to take me out in an aeroplane—I mean a taximeter—I get so confused with all these modern terms. I'm not angry with you for refusing my offer. When I look round at this happy little company, I am not surprised that you don't wish to come into the atmosphere of Mecklenburgh Square. I have enough sense left to understand that much. No, I'm not angry with you. My anger has disappeared even as your bitterness. What were those words from the Apocrypha ? Something about a ship, I think. Be so good as to recite them."

Margaret smiled, and repeated the words :

"As a ship that passeth over the waves of the water, which when it is gone, the trace thereof cannot be found, neither the pathway of the keel in the waves."

"Neither the pathway of the keel in the waves," murmured Aunt Caroline ; and she stood for a moment lost in thought, they waiting, until her reverie was over.

"Well, good-bye," she said. "Good-bye, Mrs Rivers. Is it allowable in the year 1908 to say 'God bless you' ? If so, I say it. Ah, you're going to give me your arm, Captain Bending. Thank you. As I remarked before, I have never disliked sailor men. Good-bye, Dr Edgar. We are friends, are we not ? As I remarked before, you were so easy to replace. Come, William, don't keep me waiting."

They all followed her out into the hall where Quong was awaiting them. Margaret, who glanced at the couch outside the drawing-room, noticed Paul's gauging callipers lying there, and knew that he had probably crept down to listen to Harriet's music, and had darted off when the door opened. She looked up the staircase and saw his weird figure disappearing in the distance. In those last days he hovered around, seeking their companionship in a way he had never sought it before. Margaret guessed that probably, this very afternoon, he had been longing to join them, and yet had been unable to break through his prison walls of mental aloofness. She beckoned to Quong and told him to run upstairs with the callipers. Then she took her part with the others in presiding over Aunt Caroline's departure. Quong had re-appeared as though by magic, and gliding smilingly amongst them, opened the front door to see if the taximeter had arrived. His ordinary smile suddenly changed to an extraordinary smile which he kept for one person alone—and that person was Mrs Ermyntrude Bending. Yes, there she stood, stately and self-contained, until she found herself confronted suddenly with Mr William Tressider, her so-called private detective, and a tall, grim, old lady leaning on Edward's arm. The house at Westminster had given poor Ermyntrude many shocks, but

this unexpected meeting was the severest of them all ; for William Tressider was the last person on earth she would have wished to meet in Mrs Rivers's home, and in Edward's presence. But she had always risen to the demands of every trying occasion ; and her imperial superiority, an integral part of her nature, which she could control, if she chose, but never destroy, asserted itself boldly at this critical moment for the safeguarding of her dignity. She fled to her mountain heights, and from those inaccessible summits looked down calmly and impersonally on the little group of human beings gathered together in the low-lying plains. She greeted them with an intellectual smile, bowed with stately graciousness to poor William who was longing for the safety and security of his Bank, and allowed herself to be presented with due ceremony to Miss Benbow. Much to Margaret's amusement, Aunt Caroline seemed quelled by Ermyntrude's regal manner and appearance. Her ready tongue remained quiet, and she glanced at her new acquaintance with a certain amount of bewildered inquiry, as though she were trying to guess the name of the Remote Region, of which this personage was evidently an important inhabitant.

"I hope," Ermyntrude was saying, closing her eyes and opening them again, "I hope that Captain Bending has been telling you about his Polar Expedition. That would interest you, I am quite sure. You heard, no doubt, of his recent lecture before the Royal Institution, did you not? That was a proud evening for us. A most illuminating lecture—especially that part of it which dealt with the Continental Shelf. There is a long letter in the *Times* to-day on the subject of the Continental Shelf, which appears indeed to excite as much heated controversy as Free Trade or Tariff Reform—or even Women's Suffrage, Mr Tressider."

Poor William looked more embarrassed than ever at being addressed even thus harmlessly, but he smiled his best bank manager's smile, and coughed a little. No one else smiled. Everyone else was stunned by the impact of Ermyntrude's ironclad of culture. Harriet was the first to recover herself,

and, with the co-operation of Hughie and Bess, piloted Mrs Bending safely into the drawing-room. Bending, who seemed half stupefied, offered his arm to Aunt Caroline, and made some attempt to carry out his original intention of conducting the ancient dame to her taximeter. But Margaret prevented him.

"Please allow me to take your place, Captain," she said cheerily. "It is my duty—my family duty."

And she whispered:

"Go and see after Mrs Emyntrude. She is evidently suffering from a bad culture attack."

He hurried off to help Harriet, and Aunt Caroline was escorted by Margaret, Quong, William and Dr Edgar. Aunt Caroline leaned heavily on her niece's arm.

"Continental Shelf, indeed!" she said crossly. "Continental nonsense. What does she know about it, pray? I don't want to know about it. And I don't suppose she does either. She just pretends to herself. That's what she does."

"She thinks she wants to know," remarked Margaret brightly. "And it comes to the same thing in the long run, doesn't it? You only have to think long enough that you want something, and, lo and behold, you want it."

"But you don't get it," Aunt Caroline said grimly. "Yes, William, you step into the taximeter first. You must be glad to reach a comparatively safe retreat. You've had a trying afternoon, and I'll say this for you, you have behaved very well. Even Margaret must admit that. There have been critical but interesting moments. Continental Shelf! No wonder that pretty young girl resolved to rebel. No wonder she wanted the real thing. I hope she will continue to rebel. Are you intending to get in, Dr Edgar? I shall have great pleasure in driving you to one of your patients whom you have not abandoned."

He laughingly declined her offer, but helped to pack her comfortably in the cab; and shut the door.

The motor rounded the corner by 'The Two Chairmen,

and slipped into Queen Anne's Gate. Dr Edgar turned to Margaret.

"Now I'm off," he said gently. "You go and rest. You look tired. These are trying days for you, Margaret."

"They will pass," she answered, nodding to him. "It isn't as if I didn't love and trust the sailor man. That alone makes my parting with Harriet possible. She managed him splendidly, didn't she? I really thought all was over with my changeling brother. We couldn't have had that merry music if Mrs Ermytrude had arrived on the scene sooner, and in that intellectual frame of mind. I think she must have been seeing Mr Theodore Theodore, on the sly. Well, I must go and attend to her relapse. It's only temporary, of course. But the Continental Shelf made it fearfully acute!"

"She had to protect herself from her own embarrassment," Dr Edgar said, always ready to uphold Ermytrude. "And very well she did it."

"Oh, don't be alarmed," Margaret remarked smiling. "I'm not criticising your favourite. Culture or no culture mountain heights or no mountain heights, Mrs Ermytrude has won my homage for all time. Good-bye. I hope you think better of me for this confession!"

The door closed. He stood staring at the house which contained his whole happiness. Then he passed down the Cockpit steps into Birdcage Walk, and paused before the Wellington Barracks.

"Does she love me?" he asked himself. "Sometimes I think she does. And at other times . . ."

He shook his head, and went on his way.

CHAPTER XXVI

ERMYNTRUDE'S 'relapse' proved to be only temporary, and was found to have been brought on, not only by the shock of seeing William Tressider in Mrs Rivers's house, but by a prolonged interview with another poet who had even less of the 'real thing' in his nature than Mr Theodore Theodore himself. Bess gathered that he had been reading to her mother his new play entitled: 'The Death of Prometheus.' It was dedicated to her, and was to be produced by the Stage Society at some distant date veiled in vagueness. Bess also discovered a dangerous new volume by Sir Oliver Lodge: 'Electrons,' and a book of philosophy: 'Metaphysical Phenomena.' These two enemies had arrived by post during the morning, and had started the mischief at full speed.

"Of course we must expect these backslidings," Bess confided seriously to Uncle Ted, who was hugely amused by her grave manner. "I'm not in the least disheartened. I consider mother is doing splendidly. And if all mothers were to follow her lead, Uncle Ted, all daughters would be as happy as I have become through the Emancipation."

"The Emancipation has been a benefit to us all, my dear," Uncle Ted said, "yes, to every man-jack of us. I thought at first that the Solicitor-General was going to be thrown overboard. But I suppose I was wrong. I generally am."

"No, you weren't wrong," Bess said smiling. "He did nearly go overboard. But I changed my mind."

"Ah," said Uncle Ted winking at his pipe. "I'm glad. I'm fond of Hughie."

"You've been most awfully kind to him," Bess said impulsively. "He'd follow you to the ends of the earth."

"Hughie has been good to me," Uncle Ted returned. "A middle-aged man's a fool if he turns away from the jolly good friendship of a young fellow. Now I'm going to tell you a secret. No one knows yet, but Hughie will know in two or three hours' time. I've got him leave of absence for two days, and to-morrow he and I are off to Cheshire."

"To Cheshire?" she exclaimed. "All that way? And only five days before we lose you? And with Hughie? What can it mean?"

"Well, I'll explain," he said, "I've been waiting till I knew for certain that the brute had returned to his home. He's there now—my shipmate's husband, you know—that brute who insulted her at the Royal Institution, when your mother came into line. I've got to see him, give him a bit of my mind and speak some words of warning to him. And I can't go alone. I must have some one to say: '*Easy, easy, Uncle Ted,*' before I make a dash into the house. As I can't take you—it wouldn't do, Bess, my little dear—I'm going to take your representative—my friend Hughie. There, I've told you the secret first. Don't let anyone know. And certainly not the Westminster people. They'd be anxious. And there's nothing to be anxious about. But it is my duty, as well as my wish, by Jove, to meet that beast face to face."

"You won't run any risks, you won't do anything violent," Bess begged, greatly pleased by the confidence, and yet dismayed by the news. "We all thought you were going to attack the changeling."

"I thought so, too," laughed Uncle Ted. "A rush of indignation came over me."

"But a rush of indignation will come over you when you see Mr James Blackburn," Bess exclaimed. "And what then?"

"I don't know, Bess," he said simply. "That has to work itself out."

"Yes, of course," she answered eagerly. "I understand. One must just hope that all will go well. I wish I could

have been with you. But as I can't, I think it is perfectly darling of you to have chosen Hughie, Uncle Ted. Doesn't that alone show what you think of him? He will be off his head from joy and pride. Oh dear, I shall be very anxious. I shall keep on saying: '*Easy, easy, Uncle Ted.*' But I'm glad you're going. Oh, why wasn't I born a man—a pirate—a sea-robber—an explorer—a harpooner! My spirit's up! My spirit's up! If I could only go too!"

Of course she did not go. But she saw them off at Euston the next morning, and gave them good counsel together with wise words of warning and caution.

They arrived at Crewe about two o'clock, and thence went on to Sandbach. James Blackburn's place was four or five miles from Sandbach, and they drove through wooded country to reach it. They decided to put up for the night at the 'Black Cock,' about a mile away from the Hall; and Uncle Ted thought it would be better if Hughie remained at the inn and awaited his return there. But Hughie would have nothing of the sort. No, he said, he intended to go to the very house, the very room, if possible. So it was settled this way; and they continued their journey direct to the Hall.

It was a blazing hot day in the middle of July, with never a breath of air to lessen the fierceness of the sun. Bending became agitated as they approached nearer to his shipmate's former home. She had given him all her confidences; she had withheld nothing from him; but the history of her marriage with James Blackburn and her escape with Robert Stilling took on an added and more painful meaning, as he passed along the road over which she must have driven thousands of times, and as his eyes saw the trees, fields and lanes, each one of which must have been to her a familiar friend. He was invaded by many emotions: anger, against Blackburn, jealousy of Stilling, irritation with her, annoyance with circumstance, contempt of himself for being jealous, irritated and annoyed, sympathy with her unhappiness lived through here, regrets over her soiled reputation, doubts about his own wisdom in marrying her.

He forgot his own poor record—not a difficult thing for even the most just and generous man to do. In fact, like Ermyntrude, Bending had a relapse. It was only temporary, of course; but it was a relapse. No one ever knew of it, except himself. The young fellow strolling by his side up the long carriage-drive, watched him take off his hat, wave it about wildly as though cooling his head and forget to replace it.

“By Jove, he is worked up,” Hughie thought. “Glad the boss let me off, and that I am here to look after him. Ugly job this.”

He put his hat on as they came to the end of the carriage-drive with its grassy banks and fine rhododendron bushes. He stood still a moment, and surveyed the stretch of lawn in front of the stately white house, of which Harriet had once been mistress. A peacock was strutting across the grass. To the left an enchanting pergola of roses attracted his attention. Yonder stood the great cedar tree of which she had spoken with pride; and further off, he saw greenhouses, and a pond with floating waterlilies, and foreign water-fowl. Finally he signed to Hughie, and they went forward to the front door which appeared to open into a conservatory. He rang the bell, and bit his lips whilst he waited for admission. Hughie glanced at him uneasily.

“All right, sir?” he asked kindly.

“All right, old fellow,” Uncle Ted said, nodding his head. “Trying times, you know.”

The servant came and told them that Mr Blackburn was not at home, but that he would certainly be back in an hour or so. Would they not wait? Bending replied that they would prefer to call again in a couple of hours. He was on the point of going, when an open carriage drove up, and a lady stepped out. The two men raised their hats, and she bowed and glanced at them enquiringly. From her quiet air of proprietorship, it was obvious that she was Mrs Blackburn; but Bending would in any case have recognised her from Harriet's description of her appearance when they met in those strange and painful circumstances, in the Abbey.

"Can I be of any service to you?" she asked courteously in her somewhat twangy voice, which sounded curiously at variance with her attractive face, her winning archness of expression and her dainty attire. "Were you wishing to see Mr Blackburn?"

"Yes," Bending answered, a little confused. "But I learn he is out. If you will allow us, we will call again. It is a—matter of—of importance. I particularly wish to see him."

"May I ask your name?" she said. "And won't you come in and wait?"

"My name is Bending," he said. "And this is my nephew. But we must not intrude on you. We will call again."

"Not Bending the explorer?" she exclaimed excitedly. "Yes? Come in—come in! I'm so glad to see you. And your nephew, too."

But Bending did not move from the threshold, though he smiled and showed his appreciation of the kind welcome she was offering him.

"Mrs Blackburn," he said gently, "I cannot come into your house under false pretences. This isn't a friendly visit I am paying to your husband. It is necessary that I should meet him face to face and give him a grave warning."

"A grave warning," she repeated excitedly, "a grave warning."

"Yes," Bending said. "You understand I cannot accept your hospitality."

"Yes, you can, yes, you can," she answered decidedly. And without waiting for an answer, she signed to them imperiously to follow her into the drawing-room. Bending, uneasy in his mind, but unwilling to appear discourteous, obeyed her. Hughie remained behind and slipped out into the garden.

"Your nephew?" Mrs Blackburn asked, as Bending came alone into the room. "Where is he?"

"He will wait," Bending answered. "He will take a stroll over your beautiful grounds."

"Yes, they are beautiful," she said, with a tone of regret in her voice.

And she added involuntarily :

"I shall miss them."

"You are thinking of going away, then?" he asked. "Travelling to far-off regions, I suppose. That is what we all do now-a-days."

"You do," she said smiling. "And no doubt you will be off to the North Pole again soon?"

"Not yet," he answered shaking his head.

"Why, of course, I remember now," she exclaimed. "You're going to be married. I saw something about it in the papers."

Bending was greatly stirred.

"Mrs Blackburn," he cried. "It is because of my marriage that I am here. I must explain to you the object of this visit; and then you'll realise that I have no right to intrude on your kindness. I am marrying Harriet Rivers—your husband's divorced wife—and I have come to tell him that she now has a champion to protect her against—you must pardon me—you must pardon me—against his repeated insults and insolence. You yourself were a witness on one occasion—in the Abbey. Do you remember?"

"Do I remember?" she exclaimed, springing up from the sofa. "Do I remember? Why, that scene has haunted me, day and night. And you're going to marry that beautiful woman with the big generous heart. Oh, I know she has a generous heart, and I've heard it from all sides in these parts. Kind memories of her linger here. Be good to her, Captain Bending. She has suffered here—I can tell you that—I've thought of her, sympathised with her, yes, yes, and rejoiced over her escape. And you can tell her from me that I am going to escape; and she'll rejoice over my freedom."

"You are going to escape," Bending repeated, staring at her.

"Yes," she went on with increasing excitement. "To-morrow I leave this house never to return. To-morrow I wend my way back to my home in Texas; and these months of my married life will be only as an evil recollection, with

which I shall fight for all I'm worth. She escaped differently, poor darling—different temperament—different upbringing—she was bound down by heavy traditions to go on enduring—enduring long past her power of endurance, and in her utter collapse and despair she had to lean on someone else's strength to help her through—the history of many and many a woman who has been sneered at for taking the step she took, by means of a friend and lover. But I don't sneer. Perhaps if I'd endured long enough, and temptation had come my way, her history would have been my history. And in any case, our aims and objects are the same—freedom—freedom. Yes, to-morrow I go. I can scarcely believe myself. And the only thing I shall regret is--what do you think?--the grass, the lawns, the green grass, the green grass. What must you think of me for speaking to you in this manner? And you see, because I can't control myself, I've put myself in your power—the power of a person I've never seen before."

"But the right person," Bending said gently; and his kind voice and open countenance gave a calming assurance of his honour and loyalty.

"Thank you," she said.

"The right person," he repeated, "and for more reasons than one, Mrs Blackburn. First, because you are in trouble, and then because you healed her—in the Abbey, you know—she said you healed her—and then because you have healed me."

"Healed you?" she asked in surprise. "How?"

"Don't ask me to explain," he said; and he turned from her and looked out at the green lawns. The relapse was over. It was followed by bitter shame, remorse, added love and sympathy born of a larger understanding.

Perhaps Mrs Blackburn guessed his secret. Women know many things by intuition; and she was in that mysterious uplifted condition, when the mind leaps out to instant understanding. Whether she knew or not, she did not attempt to disturb his reflections; but when at length he

recollected her presence and came towards her, she whispered :

“Be very good to her, Captain Bending.”

“Yes,” he said, and he took the hand which she held out and kissed it reverently.

“Good-bye, Mrs Blackburn,” he said. “Good luck to you in your old home. We are going to be married almost immediately, and then we’re off to Australia. But we have a dear friend living in our London house—Mrs Rivers’s house—No. 30 Old Queen Street, Westminster. If you should prove to be in trouble, she will not fail you. Her name is Margaret Tressider. Will you remember? Now good-bye again. I cannot wait for your husband here. I’m stopping for the night at the ‘Black Cock,’ and I’ll send him a letter from there, asking for an interview. If he refuses to come to me, I must come here again. For I intend to see him. It is absolutely necessary that we should meet.

She made no comment on his words. It was obvious that she was entirely indifferent to Blackburn’s welfare, and that the probabilities of an unpleasant encounter between her husband and himself were of no significance to her. He realised that a man must have tried a wife beyond all telling to have forfeited her protectiveness in an hour of strain. And she did not look a hard woman. Even the expression of a set determination on her face, could not rob her eyes of their tenderness, nor her features of an engaging archness not moulded for tragedies. She did not now attempt to detain Bending. She accompanied him through the hall to the front door, beckoned to Hughie who was lingering outside, spoke a few pleasant words to the young fellow, and walked with the two men as far as the beginning of the carriage drive. Here she stopped.

“Good-bye, Captain Bending,” she said. “Tell her—tell her how glad I am for her happiness. No. 30 Old Queen Street. No. 30 Old Queen Street, Westminster. Margaret Tressider. I shall remember.”

She left them. They found their way out of the grounds,

picked up their trap, and had nearly arrived back at the 'Black Cock,' when they saw a rider coming towards them, at a furious pace. Their driver told them that this must be Squire Blackburn; for no one else in the whole district rode at such a break-neck pace. It was he. They drew up short, and called to him to stop as he came dashing past. Bending the rein, he reined out, and hurried to the horse's side.

"What is it?" Blackburn asked impatiently. "My horse can't stand. What is it you want?"

"I want an interview with you," Bending answered, his anger rising at once at the man's insolent tone. "I've been to your house, and now I'll trouble you to come to the inn. My name is Bending."

"I don't know you," Blackburn called out roughly. "I've no time. You can write. Stand back. She kicks."

"Captain Edward Bending," Bending repeated in a clear voice, and without moving an inch out of his way. "And you have to see me, sir, whether you like it or not."

Blackburn's face, flushed already, coloured to a deeper crimson. He now recognised the explorer. Without saying a word, he turned his horse's head and dashed on to the 'Black Cock.' When the trap arrived a few minutes later, Hughie turned to Uncle Ted who had now worked himself into a furious rage, and said:

"For God's sake, Uncle Ted, easy, easy. Remember you're going to get married. Keep cool, Uncle Ted, keep cool, I implore you. The man's half drunk as it is."

In answer Uncle Ted gave him an indignant glance which plainly meant: "Don't interfere with me, you damned young idiot," and stalked into the little coffee-room where Blackburn was awaiting him. The door closed with a bang. The two men were face to face and alone. They stared at each other in silence at first; and then Blackburn said surlily and with thickened speech:

"Well, Captain Bending, what do you want of me? Sorry I didn't recognise you on the road. What do you want of me?"

"I want nothing from you," Bending answered with sur-

prising calmness. "I have merely come to tell you that the woman whom you divorced, honours me by marrying me in five days' time."

"What's that to do with me, I should like to know?" Blackburn asked with biting scorn. "I wish you joy of her. I washed my hands of the baggage years ago."

"But you won't find you've washed your hands out im- Bending replied with sudden rage. "That's the pve a That's why you're here. That's why I'm here. You ha- to reckon with me now, not with a defenceless woman who can't protect herself from your insults. Oh, I've heard. My God, if I'd been near you at the Royal Institution that evening, if I'd been near you in the Abbey that afternoon, I'd have -- --"

"Well, I'll allow she has a mighty champion," Blackburn interrupted with a rasping laugh. "Perhaps I shall have to look out. But I tell you she's not worth—*that*. You don't know her history—she's——"

"I know her history—and I know yours," Bending broke in, now fully roused.

Blackburn gave a contemptuous laugh.

"Then you'll understand," he sneered, "that there's not much to choose between her history and my history. I wish you joy of her. One day you'll come home and find the bird flown. She——"

"Don't dare to say another word of her," Bending cried, almost choking with passion. "I've come to warn you that you have to deal with me in the future—no, by God—not in the future, but now—now."

He had lost control over himself. He swung up to Blackburn, and with his left hand grasped the man's arm convulsively. In another second he would have attacked him. But the door opened.

Hughie appeared. His face was deadly white; but his manner was amazingly authoritative. Without a moment's hesitation, he advanced on Uncle Ted, and put both his hands heavily on Uncle Ted's shoulders.

"Uncle Ted," he said, in his young ringing voice, "the man's not worth this. You can see for yourself that he's not worth it. You've told him what you wanted to tell him. He knows perfectly well that he can't trifle with you. Any-one would know that. Easy, easy, old fellow. Oh, you can be as angry as you like with me. I don't care. Come thene, Uncle Ted. Easy, easy's the word."

decond turning to the other man with equal authoritativeness the young fellow said :

"You see you have a devil of an enemy in him—and in me, too, sir. I also warn you. I heard you."

Then with lightning speed he hustled Uncle Ted into the dog-cart, seized the reins himself, and dashed straight off to Sandbach.

After they had gone two or three hundred yards, Bending took off his hat, and wiped his forehead and his temples where the veins stood out, swollen and blue.

"Gad," he said, "you're an astute young devil.—that's what you are—another half second and I should have killed the cur."

So this was how Hughie brought the Captain safely back to the happiness which was awaiting him.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE laurels of this little rural expedition belonged to the very proud young Solicitor-General. Hughie was petted and appreciated as though he had been a hero returning from the conquest of a continent. He pretended, of course, that he did not deserve the praise and thanks which he was enjoying hugely. But what he liked most of all was Bess's secret admission.

"Darling old Hughie," she said, "I'm fearfully proud of you. And you've been such a brick about the Emancipation."

"The Emancipation has been a fine thing for us all, Bess," he said. "It got us out of ruts, didn't it? And I haven't lost you, have I? And are you quite sure I can leave off being haughty?"

"Yes, for the time," she laughed, giving him a kiss.

"What a relief not to have to be haughty," he said quaintly—"even for a time!"

Their young voices rang out merrily, and Uncle Ted whispered to his shipmate:

"No doubt now about those two young craft steering side by side, as we shall always do, sweetheart."

"How I hope I shan't have many tornadoes at first," Harriet remarked simply.

"At first!" repeated Bending and Margaret in chorus and up to the day of the marriage Harriet was well teased for those words.

They were married before the Registrar on the twentieth of July, five days after the encounter with James Blackburn. They had chosen to have no grand preparations, no senseless display. The only member of the household who dressed up for the occasion, was Quong. He wore a resplendent

new silk-embroidered coat suitable for high ceremonial; and polished his pigtail, until it shone like a sword. He tried to induce Paul to put on a necktie. But in vain. However, as Margaret remarked to Ermytrude, the Chinaman's magnificence did duty for everyone; and his smiling but consequential demeanour lent a tone of state importance to the simple lunch. He had insisted on having the table decorated with roses; and without consulting anyone, he had caused the window-boxes to be renewed with fresh pink geraniums. He was, in fact, exceedingly masterful, but 'heap happy': like all Chinamen, dearly loving a ceremony.

There were telegrams of congratulation from several members of the Orchardson Expedition, good wishes from all quarters, and letters from many old friends, including Fru Kjaever, the whale lady. Hers was read aloud at lunch amid much laughter. Even Ermytrude laughed, and forgave the whale lady her strange profession.

"Dear friends," she wrote,— "If you should change your minds at the last moment and decide not to go to Australia, come up here. I will place my whale island at your entire disposal. I can say no more. The interpreter, hearing of your marriage, has decided that he would like to marry Miss Tressider. You might mention this little matter to her. What a pity the Madagascan missionary isn't here to recite a Madagascan poem in honour of your wedding! Ah, I have always adored poets, Herr Captain Bending! Explorers—well, you know what I think of that tiresome race! All the same, I send you, and that dear woman, now your wife, my love and greetings. And I repeat my offer of my whale island, of which you speak so disrespectfully. But I have a generous heart, and I forgive you."

There was an advance copy of 'The Voyage of the *Canute*,' bound in morocco and beautifully decorated, the publisher's gift to Harriet. And she had another gift. The inscription on it brought the tears to her eyes and a rush of appreciative gratitude into her heart. It was a basket filled with delicate tinted azaleas, and the card attached to it bore

Japanese words: "*From Katharine Blackburn. Tender wishes and greetings.*"

So the old order of things in No. 30 Old Queen Street came to an end.

Harriet and Bending passed on their happy way; and neither of them had been allowed to see one single sign of sadness on Margaret's face. She met Harriet's tender little look of concern with an unwavering smile of quiet content.

"All's well with me, dear," she whispered. "Don't worry about me. You see, I trust the sailor man. You're going to be very happy. Paul and I will cheer each other. Have no fears."

Two or three hours after they had left, Dr Edgar who had been prevented from being present at the informal family party, called in and found Margaret sitting alone in the drawing-room, working at her pomegranate embroidery.

"Alone?" he said. "Did Mrs Ermytrude and the youngsters leave you immediately, then?"

"They were ever so kind," she answered stitching away "They saw I wanted to be alone."

"Shall I go, dear?" he said gently, half rising.

"No, no. I hoped you would come," she answered. "I wanted to see you. You have things to say to me, haven't you? You have been such a dear unselfish fellow keeping them in abeyance all this time. Don't for a moment think I don't realise that. And I know that, even now, if I were to ask you to leave me to gather myself together in my own way, you would behave like a brick. But I don't want you to go. I want you to stay."

"Margaret," he cried, "won't you marry me, my darling, I am yours—unutterably—unalterably yours. You know that. Can't you love me well enough to marry me? I want you—I want you."

She looked straight in front of her. The embroidery dropped from her hands. She was pale and trembling.

"I don't love you," she said in a low strained voice. "I wish I did. Dear, dear old fellow, I wish I did. I like you

tremendously—like you—admire you—think no end of you—trust you—but just that one thing is wanting—that secret wonderful thing to transform this liking into love, as I understand love—and without that secret wonderful thing I couldn't marry—I couldn't—I couldn't—I should be doing a wrong to you and a wrong to myself."

He covered his face with his hands.

"I couldn't have married you and made a pretence of loving you," she continued, still in that same low voice, "for the sake of having a husband, a position, and all the benefits of a prosperous married life. Women have done that too much. It's time they left off. They ask for fair play. They must give fair play in return. Oh, I know they've been tempted. I was tempted. It is tempting. A secure position. A life's companion. A hearth-side of your own, where you are not on sufferance. But I should have despised myself if I had deceived you, if I had been dishonest with you. Bad enough to wound you in this dreadful way; but worse, far worse to have deceived you. Time after time I've looked at Harriet's face when she heard Bending's voice, and envied her—for your sake. If I could have looked like that, felt like that, when I heard your kind voice, then——"

"Then you would have married me, Margaret," he said, uncovering his face, and smiling sadly.

"Yes, dear old fellow," she answered. "Yes."

"And you think there is no chance of that tremendous liking transforming itself into love, as I understand love, and you understand love?" he asked half dreamily.

"No," she said, shaking her head almost imperceptibly.

"I must bear it, of course," he said. "There is nothing else for me to do. Perhaps I knew it. Perhaps I did not know it. How can one judge, when one's own heart is bounding with hope and joy? Don't fear that I am going to plead my cause, dear. I wanted that secret wonderful thing—and only that. Nothing short of that would have satisfied me. I have had a singularly loveless life; but I would much prefer that it should remain loveless, rather than

have it undermined by an ever-growing suspicion that I was not loved. I've never told you my history, have I? A lonely childhood, spent now with my mother, now with my father—my parents were separated—no sisters and no brothers. Nothing whatever to humanise me. You came and humanised me. I owe all that to you. Most of my ideals had gone. You recalled them out of the distance. My hunger for money was becoming a greed, a creed. You checked it. I shall never be so fond of money again. You made me ashamed of my worldliness. I saw your unworldliness, your disinterestedness. They taught me. Even now, at this bitter moment for me, they touch up all the best in me. Although you don't love me, you have worked wonders for me. You cannot take that away from me, Margaret."

"I don't wish to take it away," she said gently. "It is an ideal picture of me—no one would recognise it except you. But all the same, I'm glad of it—I prize it."

He had risen, and he stood staring at his favourite picture in the room, the silvery seascape over the mantelpiece.

"Do you remember," he said, at last, "when you and I were on our way up to Hampstead to search for Sparrowbird, that you told me you belonged to the great company of the unwanted? You cannot say that now, can you?"

"No," she answered, her head bowed. "But isn't life mysterious, baffling? Isn't it an irony that when some beautiful gift is offered, and one knows it to be beautiful, yet one cannot take it?"

"Is it a beautiful gift?" he asked, with sudden passion.

"Yes," she said, with great calmness; for she saw that her spoken thought, her implied regret, her valuation of his love, had given reign to the mighty tumult in the man's whole being.

"Can't you take it?" he cried. "Can't you take it?"

He saw the slow sorrowful shake of her head; he saw her closed eyes, the nerveless drooping of her hands; he felt the biting chill of unresponse freeze the raging heat within him. He knew he had his answer. Without waiting, without

Speaking, he hurried noiselessly from the room, snatched up his hat, and was opening the hall door, when he paused, hesitated, seemed to be struggling with himself, looked back towards the drawing-room, remembered in the midst of his great and passionate suffering, that she too was suffering in wounding him, that she was alone, bereft of the friend whom she had fostered and cherished, and that he, who loved her with all his heart and manhood, was doing a cowardly thing to leave her un comforted in this, her added trouble. With a splendid effort of unselfishness he gathered himself together and returned to the drawing-room, where she was sitting in the same listless position, her eyes still closed, and her hands lying nerveless as before.

"Margaret," he said bravely, though his voice trembled, "we must have some outings, mustn't we? You won't neglect my education altogether, will you? Promise me that."

"I promise you, dear old fellow," she answered, opening her eyes, and smiling sadly at him.

He disappeared quickly. She heard the hall door bang after him, and felt herself invaded by a whole army of desolate feelings and conflicting thoughts and emotions. She remembered how Sparrowbird had said of him that he was always kind. And here was a case in point. He had stemmed the tide of his passionate love and bitter disappointment, to come back and comfort her with a few words of cheery comradeship. She knew. She did not undervalue the effort. Such unselfishness as that was paid for at no slight cost to himself; whilst to her the benefit was what he had intended it to be: uplifting strengthening, reconciling. Why didn't she love him? Why should there be this mysterious barrier? But there it was. And those beautiful words, sadly true for many sorrowful human heart, echoed in her ears: "*The wind bloweth where it listeth.*"

Thus she lingered for a long time, held fast by the fetters of thought; but when at last she was able to free herself, she remembered Paul, Paul with that bereft look on his face,

with that vague hopelessness in his eyes, with that pathetic listlessness in his manner. Remorse struck her that she had laid the care of him aside, even for the passing moment. She rose wearily but determinedly, and went on her way upstairs, pausing in the desolate hall, glancing at the couch where she had so often sat in secret and listened to Harriet's music, standing outside Harriet's bedroom, waiting on the landing for the sound of joyous laughter, or unreasonable reprimand, and finally mounting to Paul's workshop. She knocked at the door. There was no answer. She knocked again and yet again; and still receiving no permission to enter, she went into the room, uninvited. Paul was on his knees, his face buried in the cushions of the sofa, his arms spread out wildly. He had evidently cast himself there in an agony of grief. He had trampled on his last fiddle, his best and best-loved creation, on which Bess had played. It lay, a dire wreck, near his bench. He had overturned a large bottle of his precious varnish. He had crushed some delicate ribs on which he had been working. He had flung necks and backs into the fender. He had scattered his tools in all directions. His hands, so deft in fashioning, had been ruthless in destroying.

For the moment Margaret stood riveted by the scene of desolation. She looked now at Paul, now at the room, now at him again, and again at the room. She knew what it meant. He had lost Harriet—and he knew it.

"Paul," she said, gently. There was no answer, no movement. She bent nearer, and listened to the quick, convulsive breathing.

"Paul," she repeated. Still no response came. She sat down at the end of the sofa, and leaned over towards him. She had never been frightened of him; and on no occasion had she ever failed to reach him, in his darkest hour.

"Paul," she said, quietly but clearly, "you see, what you and I have to remember is that it's all right for Harriet. Not all right for us, you know—but all right for Harriet. That's the point—all right for Harriet."

He raised his head at the sound of those well-known words, which for him had always been fraught with a vague though real meaning, and which summed up his mental attitude towards his one responsibility, dimly and yet chivalrously recognised by his fitful brain. They came as a message to him, a clear message through the tumult of despair, impotent rage, grief, and loneliness.

"All right for Harriet?" he said, almost in a whisper. "You are quite sure—it's all right for Harriet?"

She nodded silently. He rose from his knees, glanced around him, put his hand to his head, turned to her half questioningly, smiled a little, as a child might smile asking for indulgence, and crept into his bedroom. When she looked in a few minutes later, she found that he had thrown himself on his bed, and was fast asleep. The storm had passed.

But this last demand on Margaret's power of endurance proved too much for her own nerves; and as she closed Paul's bedroom door and crept softly down, she felt her knees yielding, and her strength giving out. She collapsed midway on the staircase, huddling herself together against the wall, and covering her face with her cold hands. There was not a sound to be heard in the desolate house. It seemed as if the silence of death had possessed itself of the Westminster haven. But suddenly the front bell rang long and loudly. She heard Quong hurry to the door. And surely that was luggage being brought into the hall? And surely some one was calling: "Madge, Madge, where are you?"

Only two people in the world called her Madge. She sprang up, hastened down, and saw Quong taking delighted but unsurprised charge of a baby girl and a perambulator, and Rosa and Gerald Meir, her beloved clericals, running forward to meet her, with outstretched arms, and in eager expectation.

"We've come to stay, Madge," Rosa said. "You'll have us, won't you? Little Gertie needed a change from White-chapel air. And I want to write some poems in the meadow room."

"And I some new sermons," said Gerald. "You will help me, Madge. Nothing longer than six minutes, as I'm a living parson. Yes, we've come to stay—baby, perambulator, Oxford accent, and all. I say, what a *câchet* we'll give you."

She looked first at one, and then at the other. She tried to speak; but the words died on her lips. She sank on to the couch, and cried her heart out. They knelt on each side of her, gathering her close to their hearts; and the little baby girl came too.

PART II

CHAPTER I

IT was the end of September, about nine or ten weeks since Harriet and Bending had left England. Autumn had come into its own. Plentiful rain in the summer months had kept the foliage of the London trees relatively sweet and green, even the limes and sycamores holding out gallantly, and refusing to become dry and yellow. And so, when the time came for making a brave display of autumn tints, they formed a league of splendour to show their London lovers what they could do, when conditions were favourable for their possibilities. It was as if they had sent messages to each other by the evening breezes, saying: "*So much talk about the glories of the autumn in the country amongst our kith and kin. Let us see for once, at last, whether we cannot out rival them—for our own pride's sake first, and then for the sake of our beloved fellow citizens who cannot wander far afield.*"

They were keeping their covenant to the very letter, and were rejoicing many hearts. Margaret who strolled unceasingly in the Parks, decided that she had never before seen the London trees so freshly green in summer and so gorgeous in autumn. And she was an authority on that subject; for she had always cared to remain in London during the summer, and enjoy the quiet which followed on the exodus of many thousands of human beings—an exodus almost as mysterious as the migration of the birds—that ever unsolved secret.

She had not left London at all, for as Paul was happiest in his own home, and busily employed in restoring a Stradivari violoncello unearthed from an old French château by Bernard Graham, there seemed no reason to disturb their

ordinary course of life. She herself would have found no comfort in change of scene. Her consolation at this juncture lay in a settled daily activity, and in the quiet certainty of seeing that all was well with Harriet's old sign post. She knew that she was greatly indebted to the Grahams for this happy circumstance. It is true that they loved Paul for himself, and adored him for his genius, and valued him for the fine work on which they could always reckon from his deft hands. But added to this, there had been the strong desire to help both her and him ; and one or another of the brothers kept a kindly watchful eye on No. 30 Old Queen Street, and sent coaxingly artful messages, begging for the fiddle-maker's instant help over the varnishing of some of their own fine new instruments lately finished in their country workshops. So Paul went from time to time to the one and only place on the face of the globe where it would have been possible for him to stay contentedly ; and during one of his absences, Margaret stole Bess's Guarnerius and locked it in a drawer. He did not miss it. He was quite at his best again ; and Margaret was able to write to Harriet that he was well, happy, ' heap hungry ' and exceedingly busy.

" I also am exceedingly busy," she added. " My friends, urged on by you, I'm sure, have obviously conspired to give me no time for fretting. Of course they've been urged on by you—you dear old silly—did you think I shouldn't find that out? But the discovery, instead of wounding my pride—as it ought to do if I were Scotch—has only made me more gladly beholden to you. It is splendid to think how you took thought for me, Harriet. I believe you poisoned my Polish photographer yourself. Anyway, she has had ptomaine poisoning rather badly, and I've been helping her with her arrears of work. So what with her concerns, and those of other people, I've had very little opportunity for continuous fretting, or for the compiling of that Madagascan manual of conversation ! I must not forget to tell you that the second Mrs Blackburn called on me. I saw her off to Euston on her way to Texas ; and I flatter myself that she was glad of my com-

pany. She looked as if she had been passing through a time of tremendous strain."

It was true that Margaret had been allowed little chance of fretting. Everyone she knew, suddenly became most exacting. There were constant cries of distress from Whitechapel, the Meirs making demands on her, which she declared to be preposterous, but which she fulfilled with the greatest delight and gratitude. The cigar and boot hands seemed to be in a state of permanent depression; and she was always being telegraphed for, to cajole them into cheerfulness. The Meadow Club girls wanted her badly. One evening when she did not come, a deputation was sent to fetch her. As for the Polish photographer, there was no end to her needs. She had had a bad illness from ptomaine poisoning, had got behind with her commissions, and was not yet feeling strong enough to begin work. Orders for a photographic series of bénitiers and drinking horns for some Art Encyclopædia were specially disturbing her mind. Margaret who knew her London, and had a gift for routing out things from hidden corners, undertook this task, and carried it through successfully. Also there was an unfinished collection to complete of the portraits of beautiful women in the private picture galleries of London. And the Suffragists pressed her into willing service for the organisation of a second huge mass meeting to be held in Hyde Park in the late autumn. And of course Number Twelve had to be found. That, in itself, was no easy quest; for Margaret's own strong views and her memory of Sparrowbird's sufferings forbade her to search amongst the ranks of the gentle and humble-spirited, where recruits for martyrdom could still perhaps be found.

But she at length unearthed a rather attractive and sensible 'modern product' who had been a mental nurse—Aunt Caroline did not know this, nor did Brother William—and who knew well how to take care of herself and look after her best interests. She had begun her régime well by insisting on change of air; and had installed herself and her charge at Harrogate, a spot she particularly fancied, and where she

had some relations. Aunt Caroline had not stirred from London for more than eight years ; but she went away as meek as a lamb, no doubt only too anxious to show Number Twelve that a progressive programme was the order of the day.

Brother William celebrated his temporary release from servitude by leaving Lothbury at once, and flying off to some distant golf-links in Scotland. He sent Margaret a little gift before he left, in recognition of her valuable services in securing Number Twelve. It was a little religious book, entitled 'Pathways of Peace.' Margaret laughed for the first time since Harriet had left.

"Brother William is a most precious possession," she said. "For unconscious dunder-headed humour, he beats anyone I've ever met on this earth. I hope his Bank will make a mummy of him when he dies. It's the least that Lothbury can do for him."

All these occupations prevented Margaret from making even short excursions into the country ; but she kept a watchful eye on the parks, noted the progress of the fruit trees at Golder's Hill, Hampstead, paid particular attention to the catalpas in the Courtyard of the Houses of Parliament, and rejoiced in the wealth of gladioli and dahlias in Kensington Gardens. But her favourite haunt was her own beautiful St James's Park. She sat beneath the shady trees, fed the Chinese geese and the pelicans sometimes, and sometimes stood on the bridge spanning the lake, and looked at the view, which to her had ever seemed one of the most exquisite views in London. Sometimes when she made plans to go elsewhere, her steps led her no further than her special bench beneath a fine old plane. But this was only towards the end of the summer, when she began to feel strangely weak and listless. Her appetite failed her, and yet she was always hungry.

She did not speak of this to anyone except, oddly enough, to Hughie, whose cruel and exacting duties at Clement's Inn had not allowed him to take part in the mysterious migration. But one day when he came to see her, she said :

"I sit down to a meal, hungry as a trooper, Hughie, and get up having eaten—I was going to say—a sparrow's share. But we all know what greedy little rapscallions they are."

He brought her peaches, and grapes as large as cannon balls, so she declared; but nothing really tempted her; although she made a bold raid on his gifts, in order to gratify the young fellow for whom she had a great and growing liking. She spoke of him to her clericals always as the 'Brushwood Boy.'

"He happens to have dropped into circumstances which demand that he should be a lawyer," she told them. "But like all fine young English fellows, he has the makings of a hero in him. He would have led a forlorn hope, held an outpost against all odds, with the flag flying, risked his life for a comrade's corpse, and all that sort of thing, you know. Thousands and thousands are like him, and I wish I could shake hands with them all. But I do it through Hughie."

And to Bess who had spent two or three weeks in Scotland with her mother, and then gone off with some friends to Norway, a plan which was the direct outcome of the Emancipation, she wrote: "Hughie is carrying out your injunctions, dear little emancipated one, and is 'keeping the eye of the law' on his aged spinster friend. All is well with him. He continues to cherish his time-honoured grievances against the slavery of Clement's Inn; but the other day, whilst he was smoking a good cigar, which I had stolen from an unwary friend, he forgot his rôle of injured martyr, and broke out into enthusiastic praises of his profession, which he declared he would not change for any other profession or trade in the world—excepting of course that of Prime Minister. I thought you would like to know this. I hope he will continue to have his grievances, in order to cover up his secret ambitions. I must say I should have liked him to lead a forlorn hope in the enemy's country, somewhere, anywhere. But we shall probably have to be content with seeing him Prime Minister. Ah, yes! Even then he may

be leading a forlorn hope, not in the enemy's country. Talking nonsense, am I not, Bess dear? But the meaning of it all is, that I love you and love your Brushwood Boy. Greet the mountains for me. Your Uncle Ted and Harriet are doing that for me in New Zealand; and Dr Edgar promised for Switzerland. He went to Berne, you know, to be present at some of the operations for gôitre performed by the great gôitre specialist there. I have stolen your Guarnerius for you, and locked it safely away from that rascal Paul."

In her letters to Harriet she said very little about Dr Edgar. She wrote: "Dr Edgar spoke, and I told him I did not love him—dear old fellow. We both suffered over it, and after a time he went away to seek consolation in gôitre operations. I thought it an excellent remedy for him, though I laughed secretly. Thwarted love and gôitre! I wished for the first time that I was Mr Theodore Theodore to write a sonnet on the subject. Well, the only true consolation lies in one's work; and if you had refused Edward Bending, he would have been obliged, in self-defence, to have made another dash for that illusive North Pole. My consolation has been in not deceiving a very true and chivalrous heart."

Dr Edgar, in spite of his bitter disappointment, had lingered in London for some time, so that he might be at hand in case Margaret felt her loneliness too acutely. But he soon saw that she was holding up bravely and rising to the kindly demands made on her in many directions. And as Paul appeared to have settled down on his old lines which she understood so well, he determined to go to Switzerland, partly for a holiday, and partly to see the gôitre specialist in Berne, noted throughout Europe for his discovery of that particular operation. He was possessed, too, by the secret idea that he might be able to assimilate the simpler ways and conditions of life of his continental confrères. But so far as his experiences in Berne and Zurich went, he found himself disappointed of that hope. Amongst the successful men, with a few exceptions, very much the same sort of thing, only on a smaller scale, was going on, as in London. He realised

But success had its severe temptations in all cities, and that the best plan was to fight them in their own soil. Then he went up into the Bernese Oberland, and from Adalboden ascended the Wildstrubel, and looked upon the glories he had hungered to see once more—the snow peaks, the ever changing mystery of the mountains, the clouds, the mists, the dazzling light, the evening radiance and the Alpine glow.

But he felt too sad for anything except work. So he forsook the mountains, came down to Berne, volunteered for the Insel Hospital ; and soon found that the incessant occupation was a better tonic for him than the glacier air. There was the advantage of the change of language and surroundings, and yet no leisure for eating his heart out. He lived at the beautifully situated "Belle Vue," and saw from his bedroom window the whole long range of the Bernese Oberland. An unusual holiday, perhaps, but the best one for him in the circumstances.

Margaret was an abiding memory. He heard her voice, smiled at her teasing and perverse ways, lived over again that bitter hour of his rejection tempered for him by her gentle kindness, and longed with all his heart to be near her, even though he knew that the acuteness of his disappointment would be renewed. When he finally made up his mind to return, he counted the hours until he would see her. He took himself to task for that indulgence.

"I have no right to count the hours," he said severely. "No right."

But for all his sternness with himself, he counted them ; and when he arrived in London on the 5th of October, he drove straight to Old Queen Street, and could scarcely control his agitation as he knocked at the door of No. 30. Quong greeted him with his usual smiling friendliness, and showed him into the meadow room. No one was there ; and he stood looking out of the window, trying to summon up a suitable composure, which would put them both at their ease.

Suddenly he turned towards the door, and there was Margaret. His only greeting was an exclamation of alarm. She

had changed. Her face seemed pinched and drawn; her lips were of an ominous grey; her complexion had taken on a greyish ashen tint, subtly intermixed with a delicate bronze. His quick eye knew at once that she was stricken with a mortal illness. In a flash he recollected a few little signs which had presented themselves to his mind on several occasions during these last months, and then had vanished, together with many other unimportant details and impressions, unimportant until seen and recognised in their own setting.

"Margaret," he cried, "Margaret, you are ill.

"Yes," she answered. "A nuisance, isn't it?"

He was silent. He was appalled.

"And I didn't want to die," she said smiling. "That's the annoying part."

"Didn't want to die?" he repeated sternly. "Who speaks of death?"

"Sir Ferdinand Turner," she said quietly. "He's the best cancer-specialist, isn't he?"

He did not answer, but began pacing up and down the room.

"Tell me more, dear," he said, suddenly facing her.

"Nothing much to tell you, dear old fellow," she replied gently. "I felt deadly ill two or three weeks ago. I don't think I've been feeling really well for a long time. At times so tired and weak. But about three weeks ago, I felt so fearfully bad that I thought I'd better go to a doctor. Instinct prompted me to choose Turner. Well, he told me the truth: liver, you know."

"And I wasn't with you," he said, with a tone of deep regret in his voice.

"Well, you are now, aren't you?" she said, with a touch of her natural light-heartedness. "Don't let's be miserable. Let's have an outing together, at once. The Temple and the Temple Gardens. Yes?"

"Yes," he answered, smiling gravely. "Have you told no one else, Margaret?"

"No," she said. "I nearly told Hughie who came that same evening; but I managed to keep it back. Not fair on him, I thought. He would have been very kind, though. Hughie's a brick in his own way. But then he has had the immense advantage of being without a good and unselfish mother. Well, he's not be gone long. I must just take a look at Paul. He has been so happy over that wood you sent from Berne. It was quite a success. How good of you."

She went to put on her things. Dr Edgar, left to himself, sat on the sofa, as motionless as a statue. Margaret ill? Margaret doomed? Was he dreaming? Had he heard right? Was he going to lose her? Was it true that a time of suffering had to be passed through until the hour of release was reached? Must this be the portion of his beloved Margaret, passionately loved and yearned for? And was he to stand by and not lift a hand to help her? But how could he help her? There must be other opinions, of course. Turner was the greatest specialist on that dire disease. But all the same, the medical ranks should be ransacked, and no stone unturned to find some man, quack or no quack, who could promise help and hope in this cruel necessity. And if it should prove that there was no help, no hope possible, well then—then . . .

Margaret joined him; and in a few minutes they were in a taximeter on their way to Fleet Street. She was surprisingly cheerful, and deeply interested, as ever, in all the sights and activities of the London streets, which she loved so well. She quoted George Meredith's words: "The air seems dead down in this quiet country; we're out of the stream. I must rush up to London to breathe." And she pointed to the plane trees, spoke of Sparrowbird's love for them, and told him that the only poem Sparrowbird knew outside the hymn book was Amy Levy's beautiful poem, 'A London Plane Tree.'

"Do you remember it?" she said. "No? Well then, listen."

"Green is the plane tree in the square,
The other trees are brown ;
They droop and pine for country air ;
The plane tree loves the town.

Others the country take for choice,
And hold the town in scorn ;
But she has listened to the voice
Of city breezes borne."

And she hummed her favourite 'L'Heureux Vagabond':

Largement.



Un vo-leur sur le che-min, li-re-lin, dans ma po . che

Her light-heartedness was not forced, otherwise it would have been painful. No, she was frankly glad to have him back again ; and no statement of fact could have told him this more plainly than her obvious pleasure in their renewed camaraderie. He had to give an account of his sojourn in Berne, his expedition to the Bernese Oberland, his ascent of the Wildstrubel, his work at the Insel Hospital, and the goitre operations. For some reason, best known to herself, the goitre operations seemed to afford her great amusement.

"I don't see any reason why you should be amused," he said, a little strictly, his professional pride being ruffled.

"No, I don't suppose you do, dear old fellow," she answered, a twinkle in her eye. "I am a ridiculous person, I admit. Goitre struck me as being an admirable, though an unusual form of consolation—that's all !"

Then he laughed too, and they entered the Temple precincts from the gate in Fleet Street opposite Chancery Lane. They made first for the Temple Church, where she was particularly happy, the 'Round' being one of her favourite haunts in London. She paused in front, examining the exquisite arched doorway, which had been an abiding joy to her. When

Edgar to Father Smith's organ, chosen by that bad man but good musician, Judge Jefferies. She greeted her nine Crusader friends, and had a talk with the female custodian who was busily engaged in reading the 'pink 'un,' her chair propped up comfortably against the wall of the Penitential cell. This amused Margaret greatly.

"Quaint mixture of centuries here, isn't there?" she said to Dr Edgar. "Ah, those Crusaders! Though I believe we mustn't call them Crusaders nowadays, or Knights Templars. Mail clad Effigies is the safe word. But as I never wanted to be 'safe,' I prefer to think of them as Crusaders. Regular old reprobates, weren't they? And there they lie, looking grave, dignified and peaceful. Shall we sit for a little while near them? They always give one a sense of peace. And the dim light helps them in their calming influence."

So they sat resting silently, and afterwards strolled through the courts and quadrangles of the Temple, pausing longest in Fountain Court, that beautiful spot, beautiful in itself, but tenfold hallowed by the haunting memories of great men who have lingered there, and sung its praises. The fountain, the planes, the pigeons, the chestnut trees, the expanse of luxuriant green sloping down to the Embankment, the shining river beyond, the Gardens, even those horrid interlopers, the trams, claimed her separate and loving interest.

"One has to accept them as part of the scenery," she said when Dr Edgar abused them. "Modern life demands them. I know it sounds awful, but I rather like the intermingling of the past and present. Well, now we must take a look at the Middle Temple Hall, mustn't we? And afterwards we must 'pass the time of day' to King's Bench Walk and Crown Office Row. And then another little rest in the dear old Round."

"Don't you think you've done enough?" he said gently. "Come home now, dear."

"You are not my medical attendant, thank you," she said

"No, but I am your friend, lover, and comrade," he answered, smiling gravely. "That's what I am."

She stopped suddenly and looked steadily at him for a moment. The tears came into her eyes.

"Poor old fellow," she said tenderly. "You've had bad luck—bad luck. And what a brick you are. But all the same, we'll go into that Hall! How nice to be together, isn't it? I'm so glad you were able to tear yourself away from those goître operations!"

They passed into the Middle Temple Hall, recalling its history and traditions, and the splendid probability that Twelfth Night had been performed within those very walls. And when they had carried out the remaining part of her determined programme, they found their way once more to the 'Round,' where they sat side by side, and were held by the spell of its wondrous calm amidst the turmoil of the busy streets beyond.

"I've always thought," she said, "that its very situation is the secret of its hold on a Londoner's imagination. I'm sure that my spirit has rested here better than in the quietest little village church in England, simply because I knew that one or two steps outside led one direct into the exciting activities of life, and not into the numbing passivities of the countryside. There you get peace as a continuity; but here as an interruption. I've always preferred interruptions, broken-up bits, surprises, unexpected developments, and so on. I don't wish to be morbid about myself. I don't feel morbid; so don't mistake what I'm going to say now. But I think it's going to be fearfully interesting to die. A surprise of some kind perhaps—or nothing. I do hope it will be a surprise. Well I'm not a religious person; but I've always had a sort of sneaking feeling that the very last thing I would barter is that little mysterious bit of fundamental spirituality, with which most of us are born. One doesn't add to it much, perhaps—at least I haven't, alas! But it's something not to lose it altogether, so as to be able to take it along with one into the

He made no comment on her words, but fidgeted with his hat, and stared steadily at a Crusader.

"A surprise, a change," she went on. "I've always liked changes."

"I've always hated them," he said emphatically.

"That's because you've been too prosperous," she replied. "You haven't had enough ups and downs. You've got into a rut."

He smiled in spite of his sadness, and said :

"You've been trying to pull me out of that rut, haven't you, Margaret, trying to help me to get rid of some of my fixed ideas? But you'll never succeed in making me look upon death as anything except a great disaster. Death means separation."

"How do we know?" she asked. "Life often means separation. Differences of character and temperament, estrangements, quarrels, unmerciful judgments, differentiations of standard, bitterness, jealousy—all these things are separating influences, aren't they? Death surely could not supply stronger ones."

He shook his head.

"I shall always look upon death as a great disaster," he said.

"How truly Western you are," she said teasingly. "You ought to go and hear that Scotch Buddhist priest lately come over. He might teach you. Well, I'm ready to start home. Do you mind finishing this gay outing by coming with me to poor Goldsmith's grave? I want to see whether the wretches in authority here have taken any steps towards restoring it. ~~I suppose not.~~ Probably they're waiting for some American to come forward. Horrid, isn't it? Upon my soul, I think I shall ask Aunt Caroline to find the money. Now don't you call that a brilliant idea? And I can hear her telling Brother William not to interfere!"

They stood, as she wished, by Goldsmith's untended grave, and passed out into Fleet Street, where they found a friendly hansom. They sank back contentedly, and confessed that there was nothing on wheels to beat the London hansom cab.

"And soon it will be as obsolete as the dodo," Margaret said regretfully. "I hope the fruit barrows won't disappear, don't you? Just look at that beautiful mass of giant bananas. How Paul would like them! He likes them to be, as Quong says, big as clocodiles. And the flower baskets! I hope there'll be an Act of Parliament enforcing their permanent continuance. Look at those chrysanthemums. They're the very first I've seen in the streets this year."

Her interest and delight continued to the end of their journey; and Dr Edgar glancing at her secretly, admired more than ever the brave, bright spirit, which was not intending to let itself be quenched by—he found himself using part of her phraseology—by the prospects of a 'change of circumstance.'

That same evening he had a long interview with the specialist, Sir Ferdinand Turner, and learnt that he considered the case hopeless from a medical point of view, although he did not, like many other doctors, discount the chances of some subtle arrestment outside the range of purely physiological inquiry. And he never had practised the audacious barbarity of fixing dates. He never had said to anyone: "*Six months from this day you will be a dead man.*" He considered such an utterance unsuitable, exceedingly risky, and ignorantly unkind. All he could therefore assert was, that the disease was, in his judgment, cancer of the liver, and that death would ensue, unless prevented by some unknown deterrent. But he advised Dr Edgar to seek other opinions also, and even the help of Christian Science.

"If I were you, I'd hammer at all doors," he said. "And I would certainly suggest Dr Ewald in Berlin. But then there's the journey. And I have known instances where the progress of the disease has been accelerated by a long railway journey. Perhaps in a way that is an advantage—the months or weeks of suffering are shortened—the suffering. . . ."

He stopped suddenly. He saw that he had before him

CHAPTER II

DR EDGAR knew that Margaret was doomed. Turner, because he was large-minded, large-hearted and free from academic jealousy, might suggest this, might suggest that. But the fact remained that he was the leading cancer specialist in England, a master in diagnosis, and of international fame. Other authorities might be consulted ; but they would give the same judgment.

During the days which followed immediately on his return to Upper Brook Street, he passed through many phases of mental agony and heart break. Margaret was exceedingly reticent on the subject of her illness ; but he learnt from her with difficulty, that she had been to two other men of repute, of the younger generation. Wherever she had gone, he went, even to two so-called quacks who professed to have a secret cancer cure. He wondered that they had not attempted to deceive her and get money from her. But it came out that she had told them she was formerly of their band—and they spared her. She would not even hear of a Christian Science healer. The bare suggestion made her first angry, and then mischievous.

"Not a penny will they get from me to build their temples," she said. "You forget I've been out in the West of America, and rubbed up against them pretty closely. That's a good cure. I'd like to cart some of these London audiences out there. They'd have what Bess would call 'the real thing,' and come home, leaving their tails behind them. Do you know I have a secret belief that Mrs Ermytrude will turn Christian Scientist some day ! She has all the superiority necessary for that walk in life. You mark my words. No, thank you. No Christian Science

healing for me. And as for being prayed for, I've been prayed for, for years. My name is under no less than three Catholic altars. I've always been rather proud of that. That's a *câchet*, if you like."

He always let her ramble on, and even smiled with her sometimes. He had loved her absurd fun from the very first day when they met in Aunt Caroline's dining-room ; and it seemed such an integral part of herself, that instead of striking a discordant note, it sounded a tender harmony which had the effect of comforting his troubled spirit.

One day, after a great struggle with himself, he suggested that journey to Berlin. The specialist's words haunted him : '*The months or weeks of suffering are shortened.*' She might live several months—many months. But why should she have to live those months? Why should they not be shortened for her? And if there were a bare chance that she might obtain relief by medical means, or—by—by—the shortening of the months, well, surely it was his duty to urge the journey.

"No, dear old fellow," she said, in answer to him. "I'm past that journey. I haven't got the courage of a canary bird left in me. My travelling days are over. I think I'll just jog quietly along."

After that he troubled her no more, but entered on another fearful struggle with himself, which left him no peace by day and none by night, which told on his health and showed on his drawn and anxious face. He had become possessed by the idea that those months of suffering must be shortened. He could not bear the thought that his bright and gay-hearted Margaret might have to suffer, suffer unspeakably, before release came. Anything was better than that. He knew what he would do if he were stricken with that disease. Await the end? No, no. But then he was a doctor ; and means of easy release were always accessible to him. What would she do? Would she, like so many others, wonderful and heroic in their patience, await the

would she—would she free herself? Would she know how to free herself without mischance? He was not sure. She had knocked about a great deal, picked up, as she herself said, many bits of detached and perfectly useless information; but she might not have picked up just that one little item of knowledge, which would help her in her hour of dire need. It was quite likely that she had not learnt that. Her very love of life, her buoyancy of spirit, her temperament naturally divorced from morbid tendencies, might probably have prevented her from arming herself with that secret weapon of defence. *He wanted to be sure.* Yes, he wanted to be sure that she had it. And the only way of being sure was to give it to her himself. Could he? Dared he? Had he the right?

No, he had no right: no mental, moral or professional right. If he did this thing, he did it in defiance of, in outrage on, all the accepted codes of every-day life.

Dared he? Yes. He was willing to throw to the winds all the codes he prized and which he knew to be indispensable principles—he was willing to sacrifice them all, together with his outlook, his judgment, his homage to his profession.

Could he? Ah, that meant, had he the heart? Ah, there was the rub. How could he bring himself to help her to pass on her way one hour earlier than that decreed by inexorable fate? How could he bear the thought that he himself, her lover, her friend, her comrade had hastened on the separation of Death?

To every form of the agonising question, the answer was always the same: 'The months of suffering must be shortened.'

Meanwhile Margaret herself, entirely ignorant of the torture through which her faithful lover was passing for her sake, faced the situation silently, and without any hesitation, moral, religious or social, had determined not to await the end. She had no belief that in her case there was any chance of recovery by 'spontaneous cure.' She knew that she was getting rapidly worse, and that her strength was

beginning to fail, not by fits and starts, as before, but continuously. But she considered that, however great her weakness or suffering, she must stay at her post, taking charge of Paul who had been entrusted to her care, until Harriet and Bending returned home. That would be a week or so after Christmas. Until then she had an obligation which she must fulfil, at any cost. She had never failed Harriet, and she was not going to fail her now. But after that she was free. And Dr Edgar? What about him? What about that dear unselfish fellow who gave her his undemanding companionship day after day, and never showed by word or sign that he believed a separation was inevitable. Had she the right to abandon him one hour sooner than she was obliged? Ah, but he would understand. He would know. He would not judge her. He would wish her to be free.

So the days passed. She had begged him not to write to Harriet, and she refused to allow him to tell any of her friends. But it was about Harriet and Bending that she was most insistent.

"I've set my heart on those two shipmates having a happy outing," she pleaded. "Don't be disagreeable about it. Do give in. They can do nothing at that distance, you know. They could only come home a week or two sooner than they've planned—perhaps not even that, if they're up country somewhere. The only thing you'd accomplish, would be to give them a miserable journey back. And even you, with your well known heartlessness would not wish that! Promise me now, in the sacred name of science."

He gave in; for there was truth in what she said. But he decided in his own mind that, if Margaret took a sudden turn for the worse, or if they delayed their departure, he would cable at once.

One evening when he went as usual to see her, he found Mrs Ermytrude and Bess with her. They had only just returned to London, Mrs Ermytrude having prolonged her stay with her relations in Scotland, whilst Bess had continued

on excellent terms, and both were equally shocked to find Margaret so changed. They spoke to Dr Edgar as soon as they were outside the house.

"Yes, she is ill, very ill, Mrs Bending," he said.

"There is a terrible change in her," Ermytrude said gravely. "And yet always that little touch of mischief which I have learnt to—to love."

"Dr Edgar, why didn't you send for us?" Bess asked reproachfully.

"She did not wish anyone to know," he answered. "Not even her friends in Whitechapel. I was obliged to give in, so as not to worry her."

"And you have been bearing the burden alone," Ermytrude said kindly. "It has told on you. You look ill, too."

"I am not ill," he replied. "I am—I am—sad."

But their words decided him. They had seen the change in her. And their alarm intensified his own fears. He must act. After he had taken them to the station, he returned to Old Queen Street, and for some time walked up and down in front of the house, greatly agitated at first, but gradually, by superhuman effort, calming himself, controlling himself, and conquering all personal emotions. He put his hand in his pocket. Yes, the little phial was there as usual—he had been carrying it about for days, for weeks.

He found Margaret in the hall, on her way up to her bedroom.

"Only one minute, dear," he said, quite calmly and looking at her quite steadily. "Here is some medicine for you. It may help you, when you are feeling very bad, you know."

"You're not my medical man," she said playfully, taking the little packet from his hands.

He made no answer, nodded good-night—and was gone.

She stood still a moment, passive in brain and body. Then a sudden thought leapt into her mind, and a sudden expression of alertness lit up her tired face. *She understood.* With trembling hands she unfastened the packet, and found

a small bottle. The cork was sealed. There were no directions for use.

"I can never say that I have not been loved—or that I myself have not loved," she said, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

She hid the little phial in her bosom, and went slowly up to bed.

CHAPTER III

SO now he was sure that she had it safely in her possession, and was mistress of her own fate. She could anticipate the end or await it—just as she pleased. What would she do? This was the thought that haunted him now, kept him awake at night, and, pushed aside to make way for the demands of his work, nevertheless forced itself back again as a primary importance, which would and could brook no dismissal from the centre of his mind. At times he was appalled by what he had done. At other times he was uplifted, comforted beyond telling. Sometimes he would have given worlds to recover that little phial. And at other times he would gladly have undergone once more the terrible ordeal of putting it into her own hands. There were moments when he felt himself to be a criminal. And there were other moments when he believed himself to be nothing of the sort. And other moments when he decided deliberately that he was a criminal, but that he was without the barest trace of penitence for his crime.

Then there was the torturing uncertainty of what each separate day might bring forth. One morning he would wake up and hear that she had died in the night. Which morning would that be? Would it be soon or later? Would it be before Mrs Rivers returned, or afterwards? Ah, that would depend on her condition of mind and body, on her powers of endurance and patience, and on the strength or weakness of her desire to endure. That date could no more be fixed than the date of her death by natural process. But, strangely enough, out of all this intricate discord of doubt and anxiety, one little faint note of hope let itself be heard at intervals. It was this. The mere fact that she had the means of escape

within her reach might help her, both physically and mentally. Because she knew that she had the means of escape, she might not want to escape. And this, in itself, might arrest the progress of the disease. When he heard that little faint note in the stillness of the night, in the turmoil of the day, or in the quiet hours they spent together by the fireside he allowed himself to be comforted for the passing moment. And these brief spells of hope helped him not only to keep his own spirits up, but to minister to her cheerfulness. He never failed in that. Out of the whole mass of his scientific knowledge, it was the only one remedy he could offer. He offered it, she took it, and the result was that they had many spells of great happiness unmarred by the impending disaster.

They had never once spoken to each other of the little packet which he had given her; and it was only on rare occasions that she ever referred to her illness. She told him, however, that she had felt deadly ill at the time Harriet rescued her in San Diego. Then, probably owing to favourable circumstances, she had recovered herself in a most wonderful manner, and had had no return of that form of malaise, or indeed of any malaise, until Sparrowbird's death.

"Perhaps it was an arrestment," she said.

"Perhaps it was," he answered, turning his face away from her.

"You know, dear old fellow, you mustn't grieve too fearfully much for me," she said very gently. "You must remember the whole time, that I should never have been a success as a domestic wonder. I was not intended for the family fireside. And you see for yourself, that I am exceedingly perverse and aggravating. I should have made it a point of honour not to part with any of my faults. You would never have been able to stand them; and you would have turned sulky and disagreeable."

"No, no," he said. "No, no, Margaret."

"Well, perhaps I'm mistaken about you" she conceded, "But I'm not mistaken about myself. Be a little comforted."

They were sitting in St James's Park, beneath her favourite plane tree. He rose and walked away from her to the bridge, where he stood and watched the people feeding the seagulls.

"Dear old fellow, what ought I to do about you?" she thought. "Ought I to tell you that the secret wonderful thing came to me? Or would that make it harder for you? How can I best help you?"

She rose, with great effort and weariness, and went to join him on the bridge. Every step had become a severe trial.

"Ah," she said to herself. "I almost think this will be the last time I shall see this sweet park. I've got to the end of myself."

He did not know she was coming towards him; for he was now leaning against the bridge, staring aimlessly at the medley of towers and turrets soaring above each other in the direction of Whitehall. But she called his name, and slipped her arm through his; and thus they stood together silently.

"I don't know why it is, dear," he said, as they strolled home to Old Queen Street, "but that little French song of yours is haunting me. How does it go?"

She smiled very tenderly. She was pleased that he remembered her little Vagabond Song. She stood still, and began to sing the opening lines of 'L'Heureux Vagabond.'

Largement.



Je m'en vais par les che-mins, li-re-lin, et la plai-ne,



Dans mon sac j'ai du pain blanc, li-re-lan, et trois é-cus



dans ma po-che; J'ai

He put up his hand suddenly, to stop her. He had asked for something which was not to be borne.

CHAPTER IV

THAT was the last time Margaret went out. Harriet and Bending returned a few days afterwards, and learnt the sad truth that she was ill from a mortal illness and that they were to lose her.

A week later Margaret was found dead in her bed.

There had been a heavy snowstorm in the night, and for the moment, Westminster was a white world and the Park an Alpine forest of snow-laden trees.

She left a loving little letter for Harriet, in which she thanked her for all her tender kindness, and for coming into her life at the right time. And she said at the end: "Send a message first to Dr Edgar, and then go and see him. Be good to him, both of you."

Harriet sent a letter at once; and a little later, accompanied by Bending who was as much overcome as herself, started off for Upper Brook Street. Bending remained in the waiting-room, and Harriet was taken to the Doctor's private room.

He was sitting in the chair, by his writing desk. His face looked ashen. He was clasping his hands tightly over his breast, as though he could scarcely bear to let himself continue breathing. His whole being was torn with grief over the news of Margaret's death, and with an agony of remorse that he who loved her, had sent her to her death—had shortened her allotted span of life and cut her off from the land of the living. For the moment he remembered only that he

had lost her—that she was dead—that he had killed her.

He did not stir when Harriet came in, did not greet her, did not speak.

“Dr Edgar,” she said gently, the tears streaming down her own cheeks, “this little packet was found under her pillow, addressed to you—you see, her last thought was for you, dear Dr Edgar—she loved you with all her heart.”

She turned away to the window.

With trembling hands he unfastened the box. Inside lay his gift to her, that little phial with unbroken seal, just as he had handed it over to her that night in the hall. A letter was folded round it.

“Dear old fellow,” ran the letter, “you couldn’t think that I was going to allow your kind hand to speed me to my release—you couldn’t think that I was going to let you have that burden on your mind? It was hard enough to be silent and to let you suffer under the sacrifice you were making for my sake. But it seemed better to be silent; though sometimes I’ve wondered whether I were doing the best for you in accepting this sacrifice, even temporarily. Dear old fellow, I had already provided myself with the merciful means of exit. Rightly or wrongly, I had made up my mind not to await the end, but if possible not to forsake my post until the two shipmates came home to look after Paul. Well, they’ve come. The old signpost is in their loving care, and I am free to go. I could not have held out much longer. Of course I loved you, but I suppose a sort of detachment had already set in. I don’t know. Anyway, the secret and mysterious thing came in all its fulness.

Now I’m going to tell you something I’ve never told anyone before. For years past I have always felt when

I was at last dropping to sleep, because Goethe's words have invariably stolen into my mind :

‘ Ueber allen Gipfeln is Ruh
In allen Wipfeln spurest du
Kaum einen Hauch,
Die Vögelin schweigen in Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Ruhest du auch.’

And I hear them now. Good-bye, dear old fellow. God bless you for having loved me. Don't ever be worldly again. Nothing is worth that.—MARGARET.”

Harriet remained at the window whilst he sobbed heart brokenly. But when the first outburst was over, she knelt by his side, and tried to soothe him.

“Come with Edward and me now,” she said tenderly. “She belonged to us. She loved you. And you belong to us. Come to us, dear Dr Edgar.”

She led the stricken man as a child out of the house and Bending and she brought him to the haven of Westminster.

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